

Editorial

Chocolate soldiers!

I recently met two different clergy men, both recently inducted into their first ministries. They are both mature men with some experience of life and work prior to their ordination. Both are married and with children. However, both were full of the miseries of life and despairing of doing anything worthwhile in their respective congregations.

Unreasonable demands

What are their problems? By a surprising coincidence, both have very difficult people to minister to. Both have extremely awkward elders. Both have unreasonable demands made on their time. Both are expected to do far too much visiting. Both have complaints about the quality of their preaching. Both find the administrative burden of running a congregation far too heavy. Both are sure ministers in other parishes have a much easier furrow to plough. Both are convinced they have landed in the most difficult community possible where sin abounds, stubbornness is endemic, and resistance to the word of God is second to none in the whole land.

Speaking to such beleaguered chaps who are battling against seemingly impossible odds, beset by insurmountable problems, suffering from deep depression on account of the hardness of heart of those to whom they seek to declare the Good News of the grace of Christ, I felt my heart go out to them in deepest sympathy. What a scandal, I felt, that their people do not appreciate them, support them, love them and respond gladly to their preaching!

Disillusionment

Indignant and vexed, I wondered how it was that God does not judge such unworthy congregations. Don't they realise how fortunate they are to have their own minister in this day of such shortage of candidates for holy orders? Let any one of them try and tackle the work they are heaping on to the bowed shoulders of these newly ordained fellows. Don't they realise how appallingly they are treating them? Once these two were bright-eyed and enthusiastic. Now they are crushed with care, disappointment and disillusionment.

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Malaria struck them down and raging fever hindered their onward march to the 'parish' of God's choice

An example of suffering

Then I recalled a book (sadly no longer in print) I read very recently about a young couple, Mr & Mrs Stuart Watt, who were the very first missionaries to Kenya in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Their story, told by Mrs Stuart Watt with immense restraint and modesty, was one of almost indescribable suffering and privation. It took them five months to trek from Mombasa to Kenya where they believed God would have them pioneer a work of the Gospel. Their journey took them through many killing fields where they walked among the skulls and bones of unburied victims of savage inter-tribal warfare. Their first born son died on the way and was buried in an unmarked grave deep in the bush. Porters carrying their possessions absconded with as much as they could carry. Malaria struck them down and raging fever hindered their onward march to the 'parish' of God's choice.

At last they reached the area where they were sure they should live and work. Unfortunately no 'fabric convener' had been appointed and there was no manse. Stuart Watt set to and with his own hands built a house in the African style while he and his wife lived in a fragile tent, cooking on an open fire as they had done during their harrowing safari through trackless forests under a blazing tropical sun.

The local tribes were certainly not friendly. It was hard to find someone willing to help them learn the language. One man would come for a couple of weeks, tempted by the pros-

pect of closer contact with the white strangers, but he would then disappear and they would have to find a new 'teacher'. Language study was therefore slow and difficult. But with iron resolution the Watts persevered, not only learning a language not yet reduced to writing, but also producing an alphabet and a grammar and translating the Gospels.

Attempts on their lives

I said the locals were not friendly. That is an understatement if ever there was one. Repeatedly they attempted to kill the Watts. They poisoned their water supply and even attacked them with spears and arrows. Miraculously God preserved them. On one dark night, when about a thousand warriors were advancing on their little compound to massacre the pair and their children, as the Watts knelt in prayer crying out to God for protection, a flaming meteorite suddenly blazed low over the heads of the attackers, crashing a few miles further on and sending the would-be assassins fleeing in terror.

In their travels through the bush both of the intrepid missionaries on different occasions individually found themselves face to face with a lion only a couple of yards in front of them, and both had the presence of mind to stand absolutely still and stare the lion out until it silently turned and disappeared into the undergrowth. Once Stuart Watt was chased by a huge rhinoceros which came so close he could feel its horn on the calf of his leg. A voice whispered in his heart, 'Throw off your sun helmet', and as he did so the

huge beast stopped to examine the helmet and he was able to escape.

A harvest

So for twenty-five years, this couple toiled on, refusing to give in. Black water fever nearly took Stuart's life, but by God's grace he survived. Malaria and other tropical diseases left them debilitated and weak. His weight fell to half what it had been when he had first arrived in Africa. They had limited and insufficient financial backing, but became self-supporting through the crops they planted and fruit trees they nurtured. At last, after a quarter of a century of heroic labour, sheer physical weakness forced them to returned home to Northern Ireland, leaving behind a harvest for the kingdom of our Lord.

The reality of Christian ministry

Nights of prayer

As I listened to the two ministers' complaints, I thought of Mr and Mrs Stuart Watt. I thought of their call to serve God in such a dangerous, hostile environment. I thought of the years they served before seeing any response at all to their selfless ministry. I thought of their hardships, their nights of prayer as they were surrounded by dark and evil powers invoked by witch doctors. I thought of the months of exhausting trekking it would have taken, followed by a long sea voyage, before they could have visited again their loved ones thousands of miles away. I thought of the enormous problems of language study, Scripture translation, preaching in a dialect with no one to correct or help or guide. I thought of that unmarked grave of their darling son whose remains lay a few feet below the hot, arid soil of wild, untamed bush country. I thought of a mother's yearning and a father's sorrow.

Spiritual conflict

But I thought most of all of their burning love for Jesus Christ, and his love

Unfortunately, no 'fabric convener' had been appointed and there was no manse

for the people to whom he had sent them. And I wondered what has happened to such courage, such ruggedness, such holy determination, such endurance, such patience in sufferings, such courage in the face of massive odds. I found myself grieving that ministers who have lovely homes, guaranteed salaries, a multiplicity of versions of the Bible, well-stocked libraries, the protection of a sympathetic national police force, the support of other ministers – that such men should be such great big babies, whining and complaining, finding nothing to their liking, apparently incapable of loving those to whom Christ has sent them. Yes, I know Christian Service is a battle. Can those who enter the ministry expect anything else? Do our Bibles not make that crystal clear? But it is not a battle against people – ‘flesh and blood’ – but against spiritual wickedness, ‘principalities and powers in the heavenly places’. C T Studd, who at the age of fifty-four followed the Stuart Watts to Africa and who also knew what it meant to ‘endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ’, wrote about ‘Chocolate Soldiers’ who melt whenever they draw near to the heat.

Endurance

So what do we say to the whingers who grumble and moan about the hardness and impossibility of the task entrusted to them? I think we pass on to them five words. First, a soldier must be prepared to endure the most harsh and demanding conditions. That is quite basic. John Mark needed Paul's severe treatment of him when he refused to have him on his team. (I know Mark was consoled by Barnabas, but both severity and consolation combined to teach the young man the lesson of his life.)

Courage and understanding

Second, no effective ministry is possible without plain human courage; in other words, ministers need guts. In the face of trials and pressures, God's servants need resolute ruggedness. Third, no strategy for ministry is worth anything if it does not include at least

it only needs a few prayer warriors, either within the congregation or from elsewhere, to mount a rescue operation

some understanding of the ways in which God works. God's strategy is very complex, very mysterious. It includes divine patience. God will wait his time. It also includes calm certainty that his purposes will prevail. God will even let years slip by until those who hinder his will have passed on and their places have been taken by those who are willing to obey him.

Served by Christ

Fourth, every minister of Word and Sacrament must grasp that Jesus Christ did not come to be served but to serve. While pastors serve the Lord in one sense, there is another higher and more glorious sense in which pastors are served by Christ. His service to us far outweighs and outshines any service we may offer to him. Indeed, we only serve him at all because he is serving us. That is why, after Paul exclaimed, 'Who is sufficient (NIV competent) for these things?' he at once answered, 'Our sufficiency (competence) is from God'.

Constrained by love

Finally, unless ministers are constrained and controlled by the love of God, they will be no more than sounding gongs and clanging cymbals. Any few grains of divine love in the pastor only issue from God's love within the pastor's heart. The source and direction of that love is absolutely vital: it is first from God to us; only then it is from us to others. James Denney's sermon printed in this issue of the Journal gives clear guidance as to how that love will become a reality in any believer's life.

A rescue operation

There is a postscript to be added. Where a minister is living a defeated and despairing life, it only needs a few prayer warriors, either within the con-

gregation or from elsewhere, to mount a rescue operation. Not that that is an easy or straightforward task. It too takes determined endurance, rugged resolution, biblical understanding of the divine ways of working, total dependence on God, and that love which the Spirit pours into a believer's heart. If some readers of this Journal know of a rescue operation urgently needed, then realise that what you are to pray for your minister is what God must supply you with for your prayers. For my part, I know of no other way!



Pastoring Real People

Jonathan Prime

Enfield Free Evangelical Church

I want to start by stating three underlying convictions:

1. *The call to be a pastor-teacher is a singular gift. God's call to me as a pastor is to be an under-shepherd of that part of his flock which he has entrusted to my care. In being a pastor/teacher, I cannot separate out my role as a teacher of God's Word to God's people from my role as a pastor to them. They are inseparably connected.*
2. *The public teaching and preaching of God's Word, by patient and careful instruction, is fundamental to the work of a pastor – that people might be called to the obedience which comes from faith. This is the task at which we must work hard and to which we must give the substantial proportion of our time.*
3. *While the public preaching and teaching of God's Word is fundamental to the work of a pastor, there is more to being a pastor than public preaching and teaching.*

In examining this third conviction, I want to stress that I do so against the backdrop of a pastor giving his priority to the preaching and teaching of God's Word, but I am going to take that priority as read.

Each member of the flock needs individual care

No church is made up of cardboard cut-outs, but real people with flesh and blood, the kind of people who are part of the church to which the pastor belongs too. They breathe, eat, sleep, work, are tempted to sin, fall out with one another, don't always like everything proclaimed from God's Word, and share the normal joys and sorrows of human life. Any fellowship will be a diverse group at differing stages of Christian maturity, but despite their diversity they will also have much in common as sheep in God's flock.

Each believer is loved and has been chosen by God. Each has trusted the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal salvation through his work on the cross. Each is tempted in various ways to sin, to give up, and to stop growing in their relationship with the Lord. Each shares the characteristics of 'sheep' which we all share, including being stubborn, foolish and often wayward. All therefore need shepherding, pastoring – commonly described as 'pastoral care'.

However, the words 'pastoral care' raise the problem of definition.

Excessive pressure on Ministers

The lead article in the November issue of *Evangelicals Now* quotes research by Leslie J Francis and William K Kay, stating that more than half the country's evangelical ministers have considered leaving the ministry at some point because the pressure gets too great:

According to new research released this autumn [2000], 53% of clergy and other church leaders have wanted to escape from the stress put on them by their workload. 38% of clergy feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the pastoral care they face each day.... Stress has been identified by two out of every three clergy as the most common pastoral issue they are called to deal with. This is followed by marriage guidance, bereavement, loneliness and depression. Francis suggests, 'These figures invite reflection on

a study in

1 Thessalonians

how well pastors are trained to deal with psychological problems like depression and stress. Many pastors are seeking better training and continuing professional support to maintain the delivery of effective pastoral care in such crucial areas.'

Clearly caution is needed, because that statement reflects a common misconception of biblical pastoral care. The impression it gives is that pastoral care is about meeting people's felt needs – dealing with problems and crises in people's lives. But is this how the Bible defines pastoral care?

A biblical definition of pastoral care

That does not mean that we won't be concerned for, involved with, and seeking to provide support for people as they encounter stress, or marriage problems, or loneliness or depression, or the myriad of other issues which arise in the lives of the people we serve. But neither is the focus of the

work of the pastor helping people with their felt problems. It was not, for example, the focus of Richard Baxter whose aim in pastoral work was to spread the knowledge of Christ among his people by personal ministry. Today we would call that discipling.

Neither was it the focus of the apostle Paul, whose first letter to the Thessalonians provides us with a model. In this letter Paul reveals his pastoral heart as he shares his concerns for the fledgling church at Thessalonica, and describes his attitude towards those for whom Christ died.

Exactly how long Paul spent in Thessalonica during his second journey, we cannot be sure, but in this letter Paul describes how his pastoral concern for the Thessalonian Christians expressed itself both when he was present with them and absent. As such he provides a model for us to follow. I would suggest the following sums up in a sentence what we can learn about pastoring real people from 1 Thessalonians:

Pastoring real people involves loving them by sharing our lives as well as God's Word

with them, so that they might live lives which please God, in preparation for the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Pastoring real people involves loving them

This may seem obvious, but it is so important. I am always concerned when I hear other pastors speaking critically and unlovingly about the people they have been called to pastor. The genuine love Paul had for the Christians in Thessalonica flows out of this letter. For example, 'We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us' (2:8). That's Paul speaking about when he was among them. How about when he was away from them? 'But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you' (2:17). And then, after describing how his efforts to see them were thwarted, 'So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We

sent Timothy...' (3:1). Paul had a genuine love for the church in Thessalonica. Do we love that part of the flock of our Lord Jesus, which we have been called to pastor?

Paul's life as well as God's Word shared with them

The little phrase 'among you' occurs three times in the first two chapters: 'You know how we lived *among you*' (1:5), 'we were gentle *among you*' (2:7), 'You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were *among you* who believed' (2:10). As Paul describes his pastoring, he isn't describing someone locked up in a study all week, preparing Sunday sermons and other talks, appearing briefly to deliver sermons and then retreating until the next preach. No. As Paul pastored the Thessalonian church he was among them. He not only shared the message of the gospel with them, he shared his life with them, so they saw the gospel lived out. Thus the Thessalonians accepted his message, not as the word of man, but as it actually was, the Word of God, which is at work in those who believe (2:13).

Was it to please the Thessalonians ('keeping the troops happy') that Paul, Silas and Timothy shared their lives with the Thessalonian Christians? Was it so that they might be praised by them? In 2:6 Paul expressly says it was not. Paul shared his life –

So that they might live lives which pleased God

'For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory' (2:10–12). 'Finally, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more' (4:1). This was all in –

Preparation for the coming of the Lord Jesus

So much of what is seen as pastoral care today seems to be focussed on the

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here and now, ignoring the Christian's eternal perspective. But here the unmistakable focus of Paul is on the coming again of the Lord Jesus. So, in 1:10 he describes Christians as those who are waiting for the Lord Jesus to come from heaven. As Paul pastored the Christians his aim was not just to help them with the pressures of this life but to prepare them for eternity. It was against the background of these believers' experience of severe suffering for the sake of Christ that Paul wrote to them. His prayer for them in 3:13 is that God would strengthen their hearts so that they would be 'blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones'.

What does this mean in practice? Three pictures from the family emerge from 1 Thessalonians, which I have found helpful in considering what it means to pastor real people.

The pastor as a brother

First, to pastor real people the pastor must be a brother to them. In all but three of Paul's letters, he starts by referring to his identity as an apostle. But that isn't how he starts this letter (or 2Thess. or Phil.). It may be dangerous to read too much into an omission, but seventeen times in this short letter Paul specifically refers to the Christians in Thessalonica as his brothers.

This church was relatively new, but Paul recognised every Christian there as a brother or sister. He saw himself as equal with each of them in God's family. That didn't mean that he wasn't willing to use his apostolic authority – he does so in 4:2, when he speaks of giving instructions by the authority of the Lord Jesus. However, his attitude was that of a brother.

At various times the people we are pastoring will be like bruised reeds and smouldering wicks

An unbreakable bond

I wonder if it was a lesson Paul learned soon after his own conversion. When God sent Ananias to the blinded Saul, he placed his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul ...'. What amazing words of acceptance for the man who had set out to take the disciples in Damascus as prisoners to Jerusalem.

I have a physical brother to whom I am united by an unbreakable bond. He will never not be my brother. The same principle holds spiritually. I am a brother to every other believer in the Lord Jesus, united to them by an unbreakable bond. And as a pastor I must never forget that is what I am to every member of the church God has called me to pastor. So, writing as a brother, he assured them of his prayers for them (1:2-3). Are we praying for the people we serve and are we assuring them of our prayers?

Realistic concern

As a brother Paul acknowledged (1:4) the Thessalonian Christians were as equally loved and chosen by God as he and his companions were. As a brother, writing of the evidence he saw of God's work in them (1:5-10), he affirmed them as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. But note the result of Paul's pastoral work among the Thessalonians: it was evangelism by them (1:6-8).

As a brother he was realistic in his concerns for them; in 3:5 he writes that they might well have given into temptation, especially in the light of opposition and suffering for the sake of the Lord Jesus. He knew they were as he himself was, and similarly tempted. If we behave as brothers to those we are called to pastor we will avoid ever giving the impression that we are superior to them or above them. Remembering I am their brother keeps me from the danger of becoming a 'professional' Christian.

Pastors must apply God's Word to themselves

All those who pastor are members of the same church family; we are sinners saved by grace; frail beings who are tempted as they are, and who therefore need the daily help of the Lord Jesus just as they do; who need their prayers for us (5:25) as much as they need our prayers for them. So remembering we are their brothers reminds us always to preach to ourselves before we preach to them. As we share God's Word with them in a one-to-one setting, we must also be applying God's Word to ourselves.

One practical point: it may seem a small thing, but it is wise to avoid thinking of or referring to the churches we are part of as 'our' church. It is not 'our' church – it belongs to the Lord Jesus. I have found it helpful to discipline myself to refer instead to 'the church to which I belong'. It helps me to remember that I am one with the people I have been called to serve. I am not separate from them.

The pastor as a mother

'As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children' (2:6). What a helpful picture this is! But how it differs from the picture the world might give of effective leadership. Look at the words Paul uses: 'gentle' and 'caring'. There is some difference of opinion in the commentaries about what the word 'gentle' means but the picture is clearly of a mother dealing tenderly with her young child. The word 'caring' means basically 'to warm' with the idea of cherishing, nursing, caring for tenderly. Being like mothers we need to deal with the flock patiently, and show tender, loving care, especially with new Christians.

Digestible food for new Christians

As a mother feeds her child with milk so we need to feed new Christians with the milk of the Word (1Pet.2:2)

and to do so carefully at the pace they can take it. In the fellowship to which I belong we have had a number professing faith who are limited educationally. We have had to think through how to feed them effectively with God's Word, so that they are able to digest it properly.

We need to speak much to them about the Lord Jesus and his cross and all that is ours because of the cross. At various times the people we are pastoring will be like bruised reeds and smouldering wicks. We need both to speak of and demonstrate grace and mercy towards them. Gentleness is to be a mark of the pastor's dealings with the flock, including those who oppose him (2Tim.2:25).

'We take all things well from one who loves us'

A danger for us younger pastors is to be so concerned to get things right that we neglect showing love for them, but continually tell them what they ought to do and be. I've been helped by the account of a Scottish minister, who was rebuked in the early days of his ministry when an older member of the congregation came to see him and, after some flattering words about his first year at the church, said 'Yes, everything in the garden's lovely – or nearly everything. My boy, the garden is still waiting for the blossoming of one flower without which the garden of no minister can be perfect. I know we are not everything we ought to be, and no doubt we need a lot of scolding; but we'd all be a great deal better if only you would try sometimes, instead of lecturing us, to show us you love us!'

The minister described these words as a turning point in his ministry. Augustine said, 'Love me and then say anything you like to me.' Richard Baxter's flock used to say, 'We take all things well from one who always and wholly loves us.'

Continuing the picture of the mother, we learn that like mothers we need to share our lives with the people we are called to pastor: 'We loved you so much that we were delighted to

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share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us' (2:8). Considering this verse has made me watch closely the relationship my wife has with our three girls, particularly with our 2-year-old daughter. The reality is that my wife shares her whole life with her from the moment we rise until she goes to bed. I am glad, because it means my wife's life shapes my daughter's life.

Making time for people is costly

To pastor God's people we must give them time. We must share our lives with them, as part of the way their lives will be shaped by the gospel. There are clearly limits to the time we have available, especially as we have to guard the time we spend studying God's Word for preaching and teaching. We also need to give time to our own families.

But we need deliberately to make ourselves available to people and spend time getting to know them, their circumstances and the pressures and anxieties they feel. We need to show them we love them as people, that we love being with them – the young, the middle-aged, the old, maybe those we wouldn't naturally be drawn to. We must avoid giving the impression that we are too busy to get alongside them.

This is costly: 'Surely you remember... our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you' (2:9). Being like a mother to those we pastor will in-

volve sacrifice. There are no regular working hours for a mother; it is unpredictable and cannot be tied down to 9 to 5. For us, who knows what the next phone call will hold? As we get close to people it may involve heartache as a result of sinful folly and backsliding, just as children may bring heartache to their parents. But real Christian people need their pastor to be like a mother to them.

The pastor as a father

While the picture of being like a mother highlights the gentleness, care and sacrifice involved in pastoring, the picture of a father highlights the educational role of the pastor. Like a father the pastor is to educate the people by example and individual instruction.

Example

First by example: 'You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed' (2:10). In 1:6 Paul writes of the Thessalonians being imitators of them and of the Lord. You can only imitate those you observe; the consequence of being among the people we pastor is that they become witnesses of how we live. Members of a local church are unlikely to be holy, righteous and blameless if their pastor isn't. To pastor real people we need to be growing as disciples of the Lord Jesus ourselves.

I am grateful to God for a human father who has been a great example to me, including of what it means to be a pastor of a local church. I am called to be an example to the people I pastor, as my human father has been an example to me.

One-to-one conversation

Secondly, as well as educating like a father by example, the pastor should also educate by individual instruction from the Scriptures. 'For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who

Preaching to

Martin Allen, Chryston

There is not much written on *the people* to whom we preach.

Plenty has been written on the preacher and his message, the preacher and his God, the preacher and himself even – but not much on the preacher and the people. We find little more than a single chapter in preaching textbooks headed ‘Pastoral Preaching’ or ‘The Congregation’. Yet it is a vital subject, perhaps more so than ever before in this day and age, with the massive turning away from church and preaching.

John Stott in *I Believe in Preaching* cites a 19th-century author, Austin Phelps, who said that a thoroughly trained preacher is first a human being, at home among human beings, and then a scholar, at home in libraries. And, adds Stott, ‘I am glad that the emphasis begins with people not books. The best preachers are always diligent pastors.’ In our studying of people we need a proper sense of perspective about ourselves as well as our congregation.

We tend very readily to blame our congregation for any lack of growth and say, ‘If only they were different!’ Let’s remember our congregations may

be saying, ‘If only we had a different preacher!’ Having just mentioned the ‘I Believe’ series, some readers may know Eddie Gibbs’ book, *I Believe in Church Growth*, and if so you may recall his description of the ‘Ultimate chain letter’ which apparently appeared in a number of Church of England parish magazines. It reads:

If you are unhappy with your vicar, simply have your church wardens send a copy of this letter to six other churches who are tired of their vicar. Then bundle up your vicar and send him to the church at the top of the list in this letter. Within a week you will receive 16,435 vicars and one of them should be alright. Have faith in this chain letter for vicars. Do not break the chain. One church did and got their old vicar back!’

So yes, we need a proper perspective about ourselves as well as our congregation, and remember continually this is God’s work and in his sovereign will he causes growth and sometimes he

withholds it, even when we seem to be doing everything right.

Root your preaching in reality

My title is a constant reminder to me, that preaching – true, biblical, reformed, evangelical, expository preaching – must always be rooted in reality. Over the years this one word has been a continual challenge to me – reality, reality, reality!

Peter Marshall once advised men in Gettysburg Theological Seminary, ‘You must root your preaching in reality, remembering that the people before you have problems – doubts, fears and anxieties gnawing at their faith. Our problem is to get behind the conventional fronts that sit, row upon row, in the pews.’ He was surely right, for much of our preaching can be academic and theoretical unless we keep this in mind. So, who are the real people we are preaching to week by week?

Real people are ‘our relatives’

We must remember our solidarity with the whole human race, including that

Real People

segment of humanity occupying the pews in front of us each Sunday. You recall how Paul began his great prayer for the Ephesian Christians in chapter 3, 'For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven or earth derives its name' – probably the best translation of a term that literally is 'Fatherhood' – but the idea seems to be the commonality of the human race under God. All hearers of the gospel wherever they are to be found, Timbuctoo or Taunton, share the same basic needs – 'a man's a man for a' that', as Robert Burns put it.

Philip Brooks in his famous book *The Joy of Preaching* said, 'I think it is almost necessary for a man to preach sometimes to congregations which he does not know, in order to keep the impression of preaching to humanity. Preaching to a congregation is like looking the human race in the face.'

All people share the same need of the gospel

We can become over-anxious about the need to understand the culture of our hearers or their sub-culture, or their sub-sub-culture, before preaching to them with any confidence, and in so

doing, we lose the fundamental plot of humanity, namely that all people share in the same universal common need – the need for God's grace.

'It is a vital part of preaching' said Dr Lloyd Jones, in *Preaching and Preachers*, 'to reduce all listeners to that common denominator'. There was that celebrated occasion, which the Doctor recounts, when he was preaching in the University of Oxford one Sunday evening in 1941. After the service there was arranged a meeting for those who wished to ask questions of the preacher. The place was packed out. A leading member of the Oxford Union Debating Society asked a very erudite question, or rather made a speech, with the point that while the Doctor's sermon was well-constructed and well-presented, it equally might have been delivered to a congregation of farm labourers. The Doctor replied by saying that he did not understand the questioner's difficulty, for he had up to that moment always regarded undergraduates of Oxford University as being just ordinary common human clay and miserable sinners like everyone else, and thus their needs were precisely the same as agricultural la-

bourers and the whole human family.

All people share exactly the same elemental needs as members of the human race – the need for God and his gospel. Real people are just like us. I suppose that means that the word I preach to them is the same word which I find affects me as a real person.

Direct your sermon to yourself

When preaching his sermons, Calvin apparently thought of one person in particular. Luther is often quoted in this connection: 'When I preach', he said, 'I regard neither doctors nor magistrates. I have my eyes on the servant maids and the children.' But there was, however, for Calvin always one man in the congregation at whom he directed his sermons and that was himself: 'He that speaks (preaches) must certainly testify that it is all in good faith, and that he has such a reverence for the teaching he proclaims that he means to be the first to be obedient to it... and that it is for him to make a start.' So if real people are like me, I must know myself essentially as a sinner saved by grace.

Remember how Calvin begins his *Institutes* by reducing all knowledge to

two heads, knowledge of God and knowledge of self — and the two are related. Our basic aim is to teach people from the Bible to know themselves and God. How simple yet how profound.

By saying that real people are our relatives, I am not at all meaning that we should preach to them as though they were ministers! There is a real danger that we preachers tend to preach to one another. If we know other preachers are going to be present on a Sunday morning, we tend automatically to think of them in preparation and give the message a specialist slant, (that is, what would appeal to them); consequently we lose touch with reality.

Real people, on the whole, don't want to be like ministers! John Stott tells of a patient in the chapel of a mental hospital who, after listening for a time to the chaplain, was heard to remark, 'There but for the grace of God go I!' We have to recall the common need of all our hearers. Real people are our relatives.

Real people are flawed and fallen beings

We are sinners preaching to sinners, or to use James Denny's famous words 'Dying men speaking to dying men'. The more we handle the Bible, the more we know our own and other people's hearts, and we find that the Bible's truths penetrate even to dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. The Bible really does judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. You can't be a teacher of the Bible, or a preacher in any pastoral context, without being increasingly persuaded of the exceeding sinfulness of sin in

your own life and that of others. Those listening, like the preacher, are facing weekly the fundamental conflict of the Christian life, the Galatians 5 conflict: 'The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the spirit and the spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want' — echoes of Romans 7. Real Christian people are fallen beings, struggling continually with the good they want to do, but at times don't, and struggling with the evil they don't want to do, but which they sometimes succumb to. I suppose the longer we preach the less surprised we are by the outbreaks and expressions of human sin in the Christian community.

Post-modern pre-suppositions

Craig Loscalzo in a recent book, *Apologetic Preaching*, says that post-modern people today bring with them two pre-suppositions in connection with the Christian gospel. One is, 'It's alright to believe anything as long as I believe something', and the second is, 'I'm OK — you're OK.' It's very hard, says the writer, for post-moderns to hear, 'I'm a sinner — you're a sinner', but that is where we must start, as that is where the Bible starts. But also that is where we must continue and go on until the end, preaching Christ as the Saviour for sinners. Jesus himself was the great *Kardiognostes* or Heart Knower (Acts 1:24) who searches mind and heart (Rev. 2:23). We need constantly to seek insight from him to understand the subtlety of sin and its power, and to apply the solution of grace to our hearers. A good motto to follow in this might be that of the American Professor Chad Ward who writes, 'The true function of a preacher is to disturb the comfortable and to comfort the disturbed.' Real people are flawed and fallen beings.

The true function of a preacher is to disturb the comfortable and to comfort the disturbed

Real people are frail flesh and blood

'He remembers that we are dust.' (Psalm 103). Constantly we have to

remember that in relation to the people before us. I suppose people have always had to face pressures in their lives, but my distinct impression over the last twenty years is that the pace of working life is quickening and Christian people are under more pressure. Ironically, technology guaranteed us a better life by saving us time. What happened? Everyone has washing machines, dishwashers, ice-dispensing refrigerators, microwave ovens, waste disposers, hairdryers, self-propelled lawnmowers, answering machines and access to information superhighways. Everyone has all these things but no-one has any time! Pressures are intense. Young men are retiring in their late 40s and early 50s, ground to the dust. In the pressures of modern business and professional life it is very difficult to get committed people to attend regularly at midweek prayer or participate in visitation and elders' meetings.

The New Testament is aware of the pressures of real living: 'We do not want you to be uninformed... about the *thlipsis* we suffered' (2Cor.1:8ff.). Paul uses this noun, or its verbal form, four times in these four famous verses; the word is variously translated in the New Testament as 'affliction', 'hardship', 'troubles', 'trials', 'anguish', 'distress', but literally it means 'pressure from all sides', and can refer to anything which burdens the human spirit. It is a strong word. Think of the old wood-vice on a work bench. It had two arms which moved from different directions to clamp together and squeeze what is on the inside – that's *thlipsis*. Many of our people are having the very life squeezed out of them by pressures of all kinds in their work and personal circumstances. As preachers we must be aware of these various forms of *thlipsis*. Real people are in church on Sundays essentially looking for something to help them with their frailties, vulnerabilities and pressures. It is of the greatest importance that we think ourselves into their situations. Some in the congregation are probably convinced the minister does not understand their difficulties in modern

business life. We have to be very practical in our teaching of the Bible.

Practical profit for both preacher and people

Calvin said in a sermon on 2 Timothy 3:16, 'When I expound Holy Scripture, I must always make this my rule – that those who hear me may receive profit from the teaching I put forward.' Calvin had no idealised view of the congregation as though all his hearers were wholehearted Bible students – the 119th Psalm personified! But he knew they needed help. THL Parker, the Calvin scholar, interestingly detects a low-key presentation in Calvin's sermons in 2 Timothy 3 on the use of Scripture. 'There is no threshing himself into a fervour of impatience, no holier than thou rebuking. It is simply one man, conscious of his sins, aware of how little progress he makes, and how hard it is to be a doer of the Word, sympathetically passing on what God has said to them and to him.'

An indication of Calvin's own involvement in the frailties of his people was the almost universal use in his sermons of 'we' and 'us' and the rare use of 'you'; the preacher is under the authority of God's Word as much as the hearers, and needs the same practical profit. In *I Believe in Preaching*, Stott quotes a distinguished scholar: 'Your best work in the pulpit has been to put heart into men for the coming week.' Then he adds the words of Dr Robert Dale, the 19th century Congregationalist: 'People want to be comforted – they need consolation – they really need it and do not merely long for it.' Real people are frail flesh and blood.

Allen, your sermon reminded me of the opening words from the book of Genesis: "And the earth was without form and there was a great void"

Real people are rational and 'affectionate' creatures

Lloyd Jones used to refer to the order of human psychology as mind, heart, will. The Word goes to the mind first, then through to the heart and on to the will, in that order. That is God's intention for human beings, but as a result of the Fall everything is reversed when impulses of the will and the power of the emotions lead the way, instead of the mind. The gospel seeks to redress the damage. So the real people sitting in their serried ranks on a Sunday morning are rational creatures in this sense, despite what I am told by all the post-modern gurus. Certainly, it is amazing in our culture how many people who are intelligent and well-educated in their own spheres, are extremely sentimental and can have their feelings aroused by the most banal story. Maybe Christian people are so exhausted with their work during the week, that they just slump on a Sunday morning and need to be entertained, amused or 'moved'. We must resist today's pressure to being merely story-tellers or anecdotal preachers whose aim is to trigger off some feeling and give people a warm dose of the 'fuzzies'.

Real people need (and deep down want) that which is addressed to their minds and that which appeals first and foremost to their thinking powers. That does not mean a sermon should be an academic discourse, but we should always take seriously the massive amount of apostolic injunctions in the New Testament which refer to hearing, learning, knowing, seeing, understanding and so on. Thus, because we are preaching to real people, we are addressing their minds first and foremost in our preaching.

A premium on clarity

Preaching that addresses the mind puts a premium on clarity. My first sermon as a candidate for the ministry was critiqued by a university lecturer who was noted for his caustic comments. His first line to me at our assessment

session was, 'Allen, your sermon reminded me of the opening words from the book of Genesis: "And the earth was without form and there was a great void"'. I got the message and have tried to focus on a clear structure. Real people, whatever their social standing or educational background, need to be persuaded by a clear, plain, reasoned, structured and logical explanation of the truth. 'By setting forth the truth plainly[or clearly], we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God' (2 Cor.4:2). It is very hard work to aim for form and plainness

with our pulpit work on Sundays, and then they move into the material world with their office work on Mondays to Fridays. But such a division of realms is unbiblical. Paul addresses his letters to believers where they are. For example, he begins the Colossian Epistle by writing to 'the holy and faithful, in Christ, in Colossae' (not *at* Colossae, as in NIV). This is a summary of a believer's life: 'in Christ, in Colossae'. Yet there has always been a difficulty for the hearers connecting life in Christ with life in Colossae, or in Glasgow or wherever. Real people want

We have to work harder with our application and illustrative material to show we are preaching to 21st century men and women in their particular culture

when handling paragraphs which are complicated. But real people want to understand what the Bible is teaching because they are rational creatures – and 'affectionate' ones as well.

I use the word 'affectionate' in the sense in which Jonathan Edwards used the term in his classic work *The Religious Affections*. Edwards' point was that in biblical thinking the centre of a person's being was the heart, the seat of the affections, and the affections (much more than the feelings and emotions) had to do with the inclination of a person's direction towards that which was desirable and against that which was off-putting. 'Out of the heart flow the issues of life', and, 'My son, give me your heart', says Proverbs. The affections then are the target to hit in preaching; we dare not rest content with striking merely the mind.

Real people are contemporary men and women

Evangelical preachers have been guilty of a kind of gnosticism at times. In our preaching we draw people into the rarefied atmosphere of the spiritual world

that connection and need it to be made obvious. We have to work harder with our application and illustrative material to show we are preaching to 21st century men and women in their particular culture.

John Stott is helpful in this in his chapter on 'Preaching as Bridge-building'. He recognises the perils in the clamant demand for relevance today, but urges us to take seriously the popular perception of the yawning chasm between the biblical world and the modern world. Faced with the problem of the communication gulf between the two worlds, preachers, says Stott, tend to make one of two mistakes. On the one hand conservatives are biblical but not contemporary, while on the other hand liberals are contemporary but not biblical. 'Why must we polarise?' he asks. Chrysostom is cited to show the combination of two qualities, which made him unique: 'He was a man of the Word and a man of the world – his message had both a timeless and timely element in it.'

The Bible and the Newspaper

'What do you do to prepare your Sunday sermon?' Karl Barth was once

asked. He replied, 'I take the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other.' A century earlier, CH Spurgeon had written what he entitled *My Little Shilling Book; the Bible and the Newspaper*. Real people are not interested in the niceties of textual interpretation or the fine points of theological disputation. But they do sit and listen if you can build a bridge from the Bible to what is happening in the weekly events of national and local life. So I unashamedly ransack daily newspapers, *Newsweek*, *New Statesman* and tv programmes for relevant appropriate notes, quotations and anecdotes that put contemporary flesh on to biblical bones.

I happened to be looking at the November 2000 issue of *New Statesman* and saw an editorial titled 'This Selfish Land'. The first two paragraphs gave lots of examples of the essential selfishness of our society and culture as it has become. A modern counterpart, I thought, to the last verse of the book of Judges. Then came this sentence: 'It is the great failure of the Clinton administration in the U.S. and the potential failure of New Labour in Britain, that it has failed utterly to change the culture.' 1 Samuel 13-15 could have told you that, Mr Editor, and a lot more, if you would like to listen.

We are preaching to contemporary men and women who live in the 21st century and we had better not forget it. I've sat in the pews at times and listened to messages which were undeniably biblical, but which could have been preached in the 18th or 19th centuries.

Real people are 'responsive' humans

Because there are hundreds of books written about the preacher and very few about the hearers, the assumption seems to be that whereas the preacher is really doing something, the people have a passive rôle like so many jugs waiting to be filled up. Just pour out the pure Word into these jugs and

they'll receive it. But they won't unless they respond to what is being taught, and they'll only respond, humanly speaking, if their interest has been aroused. We are probably aware of the two sides of the human brain. The right side responds to pictorial information, and the left side responds to didactic information. Perhaps a very high proportion of our biblical preaching is aimed at the left side and very little at the right side of the brain. Consequently we can bore our congregation to tears at times. We have to aim far more at the right side of the

illustrations and humour. Obviously too many illustrations can stifle the content, and Lloyd Jones may have a point when he says it can interrupt the proper use of tension in the accumulation of points in an argument.

In the symposium *Preaching*, edited by Samuel Logan, R C Sproul in his chapter on 'The Whole Man' quoted the businessman who says that there are only three significant factors that determine the value of real estate. The first is location, the second is location and the third is location. Sproul went on to say that the same may be said for

God helping me, I will teach the people by parables, by similes, by illustrations, by preaching, by anything that will help them and I will seek to be a thoroughly interesting preacher of the Word

brain and try to make our teaching vivid, graphic and colourful.

Lloyd Jones made the distinction between a rhetorician and an orator. A preacher should be the latter, inspired and anointed by the Holy Spirit, said Lloyd Jones, but never the former, and he noted Paul's example in renouncing the model of the Greek wordsmiths of the day. Yet I wonder if he is wholly correct. If we understand real people we will know the importance of grabbing their attention from the beginning with carefully chosen images which arouse them to sit up and take notice.

The importance of illustration

Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* are full of wisdom on this point. This quotation has stayed with me over the last quarter of a century more than any other from Spurgeon: 'God helping me, I will teach the people by parables, by similes, by illustrations, by preaching, by anything that will help them and I will seek to be a thoroughly interesting preacher of the Word.' Lloyd Jones thought Spurgeon had too many illustrations, but I think he undervalued human responsiveness to

clear communication: Illustrate, Illustrate, Illustrate. Here, I tend to beg, borrow or steal any illustration, although one's own are usually best. Real human beings listen, learn, retain and respond to things made pictorial. Illustrations are like windows in a house to let light in.

Use of humour

What about humour? Some say it is totally out of place in the pulpit; all I can say to that is that they must be totally out of touch with real people and their humanity and what they respond to. Of course, it is a cultural thing to some extent. Glasgow congregations, for example, are very different from those in Inverness, and you recognise the difference and adjust accordingly. Stott has a helpful few pages on this subject (pp. 286-291) in his book on preaching where he underlines our Lord's use of humour as the Master Teacher. The value of humour in the right place, says Stott, is that firstly, it breaks tension (intensity can only be endured for a certain period). Secondly, laughter has an extraordinary power to break down people's de-

fences. Thirdly, it pricks the bubble of human pomposity.

Real people are eternal souls

Calvin, while preaching a series of sermons on 2 Timothy 3:16 and the function of Scripture, decided to tell the congregation why he was in the pulpit Sunday by Sunday. I tried that out myself a short time ago and used Calvin's words as my explanation; I said it was a fair statement of what both I and the sermon were for. Calvin said, 'It is so that God may govern us and that we may have our Lord Jesus Christ as Sovereign Teacher, so that we may be the flock He leads.' The definition 'that God may govern us' underlines application; if we remember that real people are eternal souls we'll be strong on application.

Packer's definition of preaching is 'teaching plus application' (i.e. invitation, direction and summons); he says evangelicals today are somewhat weak on application, compared with a previous age. We tend to end most of our sermons by exhorting our hearers in the last few minutes to trust the Lord, read the Bible more and keep praying, and that's it. The Puritans are often quoted as models of application; it is reckoned that as much as half their preaching time was devoted to practical and experimental applications. It sounds a lot, but it isn't if we remember that our aim is not to stuff people's heads but to affect people's souls.

I suppose the ideal to try and follow is that epitomised by Jonathan Edwards of whom it was said, 'All his doctrine was application and his application doctrine.' Recalling, as we prepare our sermons, that we preach as dying men to dying people will wonderfully concentrate the mind to focus more attention on the application of the message to the lives of our people, for the purpose of their transformation.

A natural, lively but serious presentation

Holding constantly in our minds the

truth that real people are eternal souls will not only influence the content but also the *presentation* of the content. Our style should be *natural*; real people see through unreality right away; they quickly spot professional poses and this becomes a real turn-off. Our presentation will also be *lively*. I cannot understand any preacher being lifeless in matter while proclaiming the glorious gospel of the blessed God.

Spurgeon has a marvellous chapter in 'Lectures to Students' on the subject of 'Gaining Attention', in which he bemoans the fact that preachers' introductions are generally too long. The introduction, he says, should serve the same function as that of a Town Crier, who rings his bell, calls out briefly and gives notice. If we remember that real people are eternal souls our presentation will also inevitably be serious in its overall ethos, notwithstanding humorous illustrative material.

We need to take with the utmost seriousness the centrality of the apostolic priorities in ministry, as found in Acts 6:4, 'We... will give our attention to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' I don't think there is necessarily any significance in prayer being mentioned first in the text, but what is underlined is that prayer and preaching must go together if real people – eternal souls – are to be touched. I've often been fascinated to note in the history of the church how time and time again God has used these twin priorities as practised by the church to awaken eternal souls in times of revival. Sometimes the prayer has seemed rather unspectacular, but it is vitally significant, as it accompanies the preaching.

Jonathan Edwards said, 'Preaching without prayer is like a sword without a cutting edge, a well without water, a fire without flame, a corpse without life. Such preaching may please the intellect or entertain the hearers, but it will never save sinners or slake the thirst of sin-sick souls.' So we have to be serious about these things and show our people we are serious about them. Such over-riding seriousness flies in the face of our modern laid-back culture, but so be it!

The need for gentleness and love

If we remember that real people are eternal souls then our presentation will not only be natural, lively and serious, but it will also be warm and gentle. This quality marked the character of the Lord Jesus. Did he not say of himself, 'I am meek and lowly of heart' and did not Paul write of 'the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (2Cor.10:1)? In this a disciple is not above his teacher. So Paul expresses to the Corinthians his desire to come to them 'with love in a spirit of gentleness' (1Cor.4:21), the very gentleness which is a part of the fruit of the Spirit. In all these references the same word is used for gentleness. If gentleness is to characterise all Christians, it is supremely necessary for preachers and teachers to exemplify this quality. So we have to guard against the use of sarcasm, self-pity and resentment in the pulpit, and resist the temptation to score points off those in the congregation. 'We were gentle among you', said Paul to the Thessalonians, 'like a mother taking care of her little children.' So we must be patient with our people and never lose our tempers or give up in despair.

Real people respond to the reality of love, and we will love them more when we remember as preachers that they are eternal souls made in the image of God, made for a destiny of one realm or another, and made to hear the call of God in the proclamation of the gospel of grace.

Let me close with Richard Baxter's words in *The Reformed Pastor*: 'The whole course of our ministry must be carried on in tender love to our people. We must let them see that nothing pleases us except that which profits them. O then see that you feel a tender love in your breasts and let the people feel it in your speeches and see it in your dealings. Let them see that you are willing to spend and be spent for their sakes and that you do it for them and not for any personal gain.'



Walking in the Light

A sermon by James Denney

'If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin.' I John I. 7.

This text brings before us two of the great experiences and privileges of Christians, and the condition on which they depend. These experiences are, first, mutual fellowship, and second, continuous sanctification. This interpretation of the Apostle's language has indeed been disputed. The words 'We have fellowship one with another' have been supposed to refer not to the fellowship of Christians among themselves, but to the fellowship of Christians with God, the 'we' representing under one term God and the writer of this letter and those for whom he speaks; and the words 'the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses from all sin' have been interpreted not of continuous sanctification or progress in holiness, but of the annulling of the responsibility for sin; in theological language, they have been taken to refer to justification, not sanctification.

When it comes to experience, the things which are here distinguished are never separated. The mutual fellowship

of Christians is a fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, and there is no justification known to Scripture which does not sanctify, nor any sanctification which does not rest on a fundamental annulling of the responsibility for sin. But though this makes the difference of interpretation practically unimportant, I believe the way in which I put it at first is that which truly represents the mind of John: the experiences in which it comes out that a certain condition is being fulfilled are the fellowship of Christians with each other and their progressive sanctification. The condition on which these experiences depend is that of walking in the light as God is in the light.

Light and Darkness

Light and darkness are words which the Apostle uses both in the Gospel and the epistle, but which he never explains. Partly they do not need explanation and partly they do not admit of it. We feel the freedom with which they are used when he says in one sentence that God is light, and in the next that God is in

the light. We feel that in some aspects light and darkness might be regarded as equivalent to holiness and sin, but the text itself shows they are not to be simply identified. The Christian conscious of sin is called by the Apostle to 'walk in the light as God is in the light' in order that the blood of Jesus may cleanse him from all sin. What is suggested by 'light' throughout the passage is something absolutely luminous and transparent, in which there is no concealment and no need for any. To say that God is light is to say for one thing that in God there is nothing to hide: if he is dark, it is with excess of bright; it is because he dwells in light that is inaccessible, not because anything in him of its own nature craves obscurity. This is the line on which our thoughts are led by the following verses, where the opposite of walking in the light is evidently hiding sin, or denying we have sinned. It is some kind of secrecy—which no doubt has its motive in sin—that is meant by darkness, and this gives us the key to walking in the light.

A divine requirement

To walk in the light means to live a life in

which there is nothing hidden, nothing in which we are insincere with ourselves, nothing in which we seek to impose upon others. No doubt we have both sin and the sense of sin upon us – 'if we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us' – but we may walk in the light nevertheless, if we deal truly with our sin, and it is only as we do so that we enjoy Christian fellowship and are cleansed by the blood of Jesus. What then, is specially required of us if we would walk in the light?

It requires in the first place prompt confession of sin. Unconfessed sin lying upon the conscience darkens the whole moral being. But to confess is not the first impulse when we have sinned. Pride, fear, shame keep us back. Our first impulse is to hide our sin, or rather to ignore it; to try to believe that the best that can now be done is to forget it, and to go on as if it had never been; to brace ourselves up to bear the inevitable consequences as stoically as we can; in any case say nothing about it, in the hope that in time it may work itself out, and that God will say nothing about it either.

The thirty-second Psalm, which tells the story of a penitent and pardoned sinner, begins with the words, 'When I kept silence'. That is the first impulse. But to keep silence is to walk in the dark and to walk alone. The unconfessed sin separates us from God, and from all his redeeming and cleansing power. Of course he knows it, but it is not enough that he should know, it is necessary that we should tell him. If we are going to walk in the light, there must be no shunning of God's presence, no restraint of prayer, no hiding of anything from him even for an hour.

Self-deception

Further, to walk in the light means that we confess our sins without reserve. Sometimes we do not really confess when we think we are doing so: we rather admit our sins than confess them, and we seek in all possible ways to explain, to extenuate and to excuse them. We may confess them in words, but in the

A man who makes it his business not to confess his sin, but to understand and to explain it, no matter how philosophical he may seem, is walking in darkness, and the truth is not in him

secret of our hearts we do not take blame; we do not admit full responsibility for them. We think of the evil nature we have inherited, of the bias in our constitution to this or that attractive vice, of the defects of our education, of the violence of temptation, of the compulsion of circumstances; we do not deny what we have done – we cannot – but we mitigate it by every possible plea. This is not walking in the light.

In all such self-excusing there is a large element of voluntary self-deception which keeps the life in the dark. To walk in the light requires us to accept our responsibilities without reserve, to own our sin that we may be able to disown it, and not to own it with such qualifications and reserves as amount to saying in the long run, 'It was indeed I who did it, but after all it is not I who should bear the blame'. A man who makes it his business not to confess his sin, but to understand and to explain it, no matter how philosophical he may seem, is walking in darkness, and the truth is not in him. There is nothing in his attitude which gives him the benefit either of fellowship with Christians or of the cleansing blood of Jesus.

The iron cage

Finally, to walk in the light means that when we confess our sins to God we do not keep a secret hold of them in our hearts. Many a man confesses the sin he has done, and knows that he is going to do it again. It is not only in his nature to do it; it is in his inmost desire. He has been found out, exposed, humiliated, punished; yet he is saying to himself,

'When shall I awake? I will seek it yet again'. It need not be said that there is no hope here: this is the man who is shut up at last in the iron cage of despair. Where there is something hidden in the heart, hidden from God and from man, yet with the last word to say in the life, the darkness is as deep and dreadful as it can be. The desire to keep such a secret hold of sin is itself a sin to be confessed, to be declared in its exceeding sinfulness, to be unreservedly renounced; and it is only when the life is brought into the light by such openness that the Christian experiences of which the Apostle speaks are put within its reach.

The man who has a guilty secret in his life is a lonely man. There can be no cordial Christian overflow from his heart to the hearts of others, nor from theirs to his. And he is a man doomed to bear in his loneliness the uneffaced stain of his sin. The cleansing virtue of the atonement cannot reach him where he dwells by himself in the dark. He is cut off from the two great blessings of the Gospel which are conditioned by walking in the light – the fellowship of Christians with one another and the sanctifying power of the blood of Jesus. Let us briefly consider these.

Christian Fellowship

'We have fellowship one with another...' The fellowship of Christians with each other has its basis in their common fellowship with the Father and the Son, but it is a separate and priceless good. The joy of the Christian religion is largely bound up with it, and without joy there can be little effectiveness, because little attraction or charm. How good it is, and how strengthening, to feel the heart enlarged by sharing in the Christian experiences which are common to all believers! How happy a state, not to be alone in that which is deepest in our life, but to know there are those who passionately sympathize with us, who feel with us and with whom we can feel, to the very depths of our spiritual

nature! The New Testament epistles are one prolonged illustration of what this fellowship means. Briefly, it means Christians are people who have in common the interests and experiences which dominate these letters; they are moved and uplifted by them as the Apostles and early believers were. It is something like this the Apostle means when he says, 'We have fellowship one with another'. But what of our present experience in this connection?

Substitutes for Fellowship

It can hardly be doubted that the want of fellowship, in this primary Christian sense, is at this moment one of the greatest wants in the Church's life – one which is most to be deplored, since it makes the Church helpless and exposes it to contempt. Is it not pitiable to see the substitutes that are found for it, only because the real thing is not there? We speak of having 'a social meeting' of the Church, as if

How incongruous and unreal all this would look in the first epistle of John! How small and trivial it does look in face of many other fellowships which absorb people in the world around us! The fellowship of the members of a political club in promoting what they think the good of the nation, the fellowship of scholars in the advancement of science, the fellowship of the members of a Trades Union in promoting the material interests of their class – all these are more powerful, stimulating and attractive than the small incidental fellowships which seem to be all that is real in some churches.

Why is it that the powerful and fundamental fellowship constituted simply by membership in the Church has fallen into the background? Why do we not feel the power and delight of a common relation to the Father and to his Son Jesus Christ, and of a common participation in eternal life? Why is not this the centre round which we rally,

If we always told the truth, never had reservations, dealt sincerely with God, with one another, and with our own souls, we should have a fellowship with one another such as we have never known

a meeting could not be social unless its Christian character were disguised or put into the background. We approve of the Literary Society because it keeps young people in contact with the Church, as if this kind of contact had anything to do with the ends for which the Church exists. We congratulate ourselves on the success of a bazaar, because though it involved an immense amount of labour and of waste, it brought the members of the congregation together, and united them over the organ or building fund. We may even find the choir picnic important, and if we open a reading room where men may play dominoes we call it 'extending the social side' of the Church's work.

where we find our greatest joy, where we can be most truly one, and inspired for the highest ends?

Barriers to Fellowship

According to the Apostle, it is because we do not walk in the light as God is in the light. We sit side by side, but how far are we really from each other? How many of us are there who have things to hide? How many of us who have done what no one knows, and what they have not told unreservedly even to God? How many are there whose minds are steadily set on something which they dare not tell, whose future depends on keeping others in the dark, and who do not realize that the very same act keeps themselves in

the dark too? How many are there whose minds have been secretly loosened from what once seemed convictions, who have been intellectually estranged from the Gospel, who would create a sensation if they stood up in the midst of worship and revealed their thoughts about God and Christ, Church and Bible, prayer and sacraments?

These are the things which make fellowship impossible. These are the things which make us dumb, because they silence on our lips the language of the New Testament, the only language which true Christianity can speak. The want of fellowship, if the Apostle is right, constitutes an impeachment of our moral sincerity. If we were walking in the light it would be otherwise. If we always told the truth, never had reservations, dealt sincerely with God, with one another, and with our own souls, we should have a fellowship with one another such as we have never

The Sanctifying Power of the Blood of Jesus

The restoration of Christian fellowship is not the only blessing which comes with walking in the light: there is also *continuous and progressive sanctification*. 'The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin.' This is not spoken of simply as God's will, as that which he intends shall take place; it is spoken of as actually going on. When they walk in the light, the atoning death of Jesus actually exerts its sanctifying power upon Christians; they become continually purer from sin.

It cannot be said too strongly that this is God's interest in the Church. As Paul puts it, 'this is the will of God, even your sanctification.' What God is concerned for is that men who have been defiled and stained by sin, men who have been dyed with it through and through, should be completely pu-

obstinacy, of insincerity, falsehood and treachery, of love of the world and forgetfulness of God, which are all represented here. Think of the deep stain these things leave, and then consider that it is the will of God to cleanse us altogether from them, and that he has provided a power which is able to do so.

Dreadful as is the power of sin in all its forms and ramifications, there is a power in the world which is still more strong and wonderful – the blood of Christ. The blood of Christ cleanses from all sin. It does not cloak, it cleanses. It purges sin away, and makes the flesh of the leper like the flesh of a child. This is what the Gospel promises, or rather: This is what the Gospel is.

It is a stupendous assertion, but the very wonder of it is the evidence of its truth. It is not too good to be true; it is too good not to be true. There are books on the atonement in abundance which, apart from all other arguments, discredit themselves finally by reducing the revelation of God in the Passion of His Son to the poorest moral commonplace. The whole of the New Testament is a protest against this. The atoning death of Jesus is the supreme miracle of grace, and its effects in human nature are no less wonderful than the power by which they are wrought. It cleanses from all sin. It prevails against, overpowers and expels all that has ever degraded and defiled the children of God.

The dark stain vanishing

Can we testify this is true? Is sin surely disappearing from our life and nature under the power of the atonement? Are we who are members of the Church learning day by day that the most powerful thing in the world is not the sin we know so well, but the blood of Christ's cross, and that under this divine and irresistible influence the dark stain of sin is vanishing away? This is the concern which God has in our life.

Others may look on us with interest to see what progress we are making in our business, or in our education, or in our social career; but what God

Dreadful as is the power of sin in all its forms and ramifications, there is a power in the world which is still more strong and wonderful – the blood of Christ

known; we should speak the language of the Apostles as our mother-tongue, and we should find, not in other associations but in the Church itself, the most satisfying and inspiring society in the world.

Walk in the light as God is in the light, and your hearts will open to each other in Him. You will discover on every side unsuspected friends. You will get new inspirations for your Christian life, new impulses and opportunities of sharing in the Christian life of others. The Church will no longer be a weariness to you, a place to which you come with reluctance and which you leave with relief; it will be the home and joy of your heart.

rified. It is a tremendous task. Think only of those gathered here, and of what sin means in us if we take it in all its forms and dimensions and powers.

Power in the blood

Think of the sinful passions which are rooted in our nature – what John calls the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life. Think of the habits, some of thought and imagination, of grosser indulgence, which practice has burnt into the blood. Think of the sins of youth and of age, of pride and wilfulness and folly, of discontent, querulousness and rebellion, of sloth and shiftlessness, of envy, malice and uncharitableness, of selfishness and ingratitude, of disobedience and

looks at is our progress in being purified from sin. For this purpose was the Son of God manifested; for this purpose he bore our sins in his own body to the tree; and to God this purpose is as dear as the agony and passion of his Son. Is it as dear to us? Is it the one concern of our life, as it is the supreme interest of God in Christ, that we should be cleansed from all sin? If it is, then we must observe the condition under which the sanctifying power of the atonement becomes effective; we must walk in the light, as he is in the light.

Uninteresting and ineffective

I have already explained what this involves, but must repeat part of it here in this new connection. The atonement is ineffective and indeed uninteresting mainly for two reasons, which though they are the opposite of

*We may be cleansed
from all sin, or from
none, but not from
some on condition of
retaining others*

each other lead alike to walking in the dark. It is not interesting if we *are not seriously* interested in sin. If sin is regarded with comparative indifference, if it is treated as a slight or superficial matter which we can deal with for ourselves, if the responsibility toward God in which it involves us is not realized, if it is explained away till we do not feel very uneasy, not to say very guilty about it, if we have never learned the power of the bad conscience to paralyze the will, then of course the atonement will seem gratuitous to us, and we will not experience its cleansing power.

And on the other hand, it is not interesting if we *are seriously* interested in sin. The man who has been compromised with evil and who for reasons of his own intends to continue so, the

man who thinks he cannot afford to break finally with something against which his conscience protests, and is therefore secretly resolved that he will stick to it, this man also can have nothing to do with the atonement. For the atonement means the blood of Christ. It means deliverance by one who died for sin, and whose power enables us to die to it. It means the inexorable love of God with which evil cannot dwell, a love which must be shut out of his life, though the saving power of God is in it, by every one who, whatever his professions, refuses to treat his sin as what it is to God.

It must be all or nothing

This is why the Apostle puts in the forefront of his wonderful declaration of the Gospel the searching condition, '...if we walk in the light as he is in the light'. There is power in the blood of Jesus to cleanse us from all sin; there is no power anywhere else to cleanse us; but it needs the condition of openness and sincerity. We cannot be cleansed from the sin we do not confess. We cannot be cleansed from the sin we excuse. We cannot be cleansed from the sin to which we are secretly resolved to cling.

The Gospel is simple and whole; there is no such thing as negotiation, transaction, or compromise possible in the relations of God and man. Everything is absolute. We may take the Gospel or leave it, but we cannot bargain about it. We may be cleansed from all sin, or from none, but not from some on condition of retaining others. Walk in the light, and all this will be self-evident. Renounce with all your heart everything secret and insincere. Let there be nothing hidden in your life, no unavowed ends, no prevarications, no reserves.

Simple truth is the one element in which we can be united to each other, and in which the redeeming love of God can work for our sanctification. Insincerity, the dark atmosphere in which so many souls live, is in its turn one of the forms of sin from which the blood of Christ cleanses; and as we confess it, and disown it, and bring it

to the cleansing blood, it also loses its power. We can learn even to be sincere under the power of the death of Jesus, to hide nothing from God, to practise no delusions on ourselves, to refrain from imposing on others. This is the way in which all the wealth of the Gospel becomes ours; when we walk in it we realize that the Apostles wrote for us, and that the greatest and most wonderful things they say of Christ and His blood are the simple truth.



Understanding Grief

Bill Webster

In my last article, I suggested that we live in a 'death-denying' culture. The same factors that affect society's attitude towards death influence and even aggravate our perception of grief. People seem reluctant to recognize the painful process of grief, with conflicting messages like 'you must be strong; pull yourself together; you mustn't cry; life must go on'. These can suggest that grief is unnecessary and even unacceptable. We haven't learned what is normal and what we can expect after a significant loss.

What is Grief?

Dr Therese Rando describes grief as 'the process of psychological, social and somatic reactions to the perception of loss'.¹ Dr Alan Wolfelt describes grief as 'an emotional suffering caused by a death or another form of bereavement'.² Dr Wolfelt makes the interesting distinction between grief and mourning, describing grief as 'the internal meaning given to the external event', while mourning is the 'outward expression of grief'.³ Bereavement, incidentally, is usually defined as 'the state of having suffered a loss', and the

root word 'reave' literally means 'to be torn apart'.⁴

The definition that I have found most practical, if less clinical, is:

Grief is the normal yet bewildering cluster of human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship that has been lost.⁵

This definition allows us to understand the grief experience in several ways.⁶

Grief is an Unwelcome Experience

While loss is inevitable, no-one welcomes the event. When people encounter grief, it can be one of the most difficult human experiences. They often struggle to get through the process, which is probably much more emotional and long-lasting than they had ever anticipated. Friends may be telling them to 'get over it'. But easier said than done. It takes a lot of strength to be in that unwelcome place.

Grief is a Natural Human Experience

Our definitions affirm my strong, un-

shakeable conviction that *grief is normal*. It is not a sickness or a disease, but a normal human response to any significant loss. When you lose someone special from your life you are going to grieve. Our grief is saying that we miss the person and that we're struggling to adjust to life without that special relationship. Admittedly, saying that grief is *normal* should not minimize its *difficulty*. Grief may be one of the most challenging experiences of life. But the person experiencing it is not crazy, weak, or 'not handling things'. They are experiencing grief, and after a significant loss that is natural.

Grief is a Uniquely Personal Experience

Every individual manifests grief in a way that is uniquely appropriate for them, moulded by such variables as gender, cultural context, family history, loss history, beliefs and values, the age of deceased and griever, mode of death (whether anticipated or sudden), and availability of support. As well, grief is intensified and complicated by the relationship lost. Every relationship is unique, and the legal definition is just the beginning of the diversity. Not

only is it important to differentiate the loss of spouse from the loss of child, parent, sibling, family member or friend, all of which have their own distinctive stresses and challenges; it is also vital to recognize that even within these broad categories there are many different situations. Every marriage, for example, is unique: some are longer-lasting, more interactive, happier than are others. Thus, if two people lose their spouse, why should we expect the grief reaction to be similar, just because the loss is alike?

Grief is an Emotional Experience

Grief is an emotional response to a significant loss. Whenever we lose someone (or something) or an attachment is broken, we can experience a painful reaction. It is a high compliment to any relationship that we miss it enough to shed a tear. How awful if we didn't! Tears are not a sign of weakness, but an indication of how special the relationship was. And now that it is gone, we miss it. To experience grief is to acknowledge you are human.

Yet the intensity of grief often comes with surprise. We can find ourselves bewildered by an avalanche of emotions, including numbness, shock, confusion, disbelief, anxiety, absent-mindedness, restlessness, crying, fatigue, appetite disorders, sleep disruptions, physical symptoms, anger, guilt, depression, and many more.

Grief is a cluster of emotions. Everyone has their own unique cluster, because we are all different people, with many different circumstances. Acknowledging the uniqueness of that process is all too often overlooked.

Grief is a Painful Experience

Part of our culture's death-denying posture is evidenced in how we tend to move away from pain. We often go to great lengths to shield ourselves from things that are unpleasant. But grief is painful. It hurts to lose anyone we care about. People may try to avoid the pain, and others may attempt to get the individual 'over it' as quickly as possible. But the effect of that attitude is to

People may try to avoid the pain, and others may attempt to get the individual 'over it' as quickly as possible. But ... the way out of grief is through it

isolate the grieving individual, who may feel they can't share their true feelings with anyone, all the while feeling they are 'not handling it'. The way out of grief is *through* it. Pain can actually be a sign of healing, as we make the painful adjustments from life before the death to life after the death.

Grief is a Manageable Experience

It is never too early in the process to sow seeds of hope that the grieving individual will make it through the process, however complicated and painful. They will be given confidence when you can impart to them that they are not abnormal or unusual. Rather you see them as good people who have been temporarily overwhelmed by their situation, who with help and support will be able to reorganize their lives and go on.

Grief as a Process

You have probably heard it said that 'grief is not an event, it is a process'. In my own work I have developed the image of the 'Grief Journey' as an appropriate way of understanding how grief works. In an attempt to describe that process, I suggest five Seasons of Mourning⁷, which are not 'chronological' but 'emotional'.

The Season of Numbness

Often after the initial impact of bad news, people feel quite numb. Some describe this as 'denial', but whatever the label, it is actually our human defence mechanism which 'shuts down' until we can marshal our resources to face the reality of what has occurred. The problem is that others often confuse this 'numbness' with 'strength'. How many times do we hear people

commend the grieving person at the time of the death for 'doing so well', and for 'how strong you are'. Then, when a few months later the numbness wears off and the grieving person is overwhelmed by their emotions, the same folks can compound the difficulty with their well-intentioned yet misguided statements of 'What's wrong with you? We thought you were doing so well,' implying that now the person *isn't* doing so well. It is vitally important to let people know that their initial reactions, which may include shock, lack of concentration, forgetfulness, difficulty in making decisions, confusion, fatigue, apathy, and others, are in fact natural. This does not minimize their importance, however. The individual needs the confidence to know that they will be able to *survive* (a word taken from two Latin words, literally meaning 'to live beyond').

The Season of Yearning

Eventually, the numbness wears off. Every individual time frame is different, ranging from days, months, to even years. There is a reason for every reaction, if we care to find out what it is. Most often, after a month or so, people experience an explosion of emotions. These manifestations of grief may include anxiety, irritability, confusion, sadness, vulnerability, panic, impatience, crying, among many others. Everything seems to touch the person on the raw nerve. It is important to validate these emotions, for they are teaching the person about their feelings regarding the old life which has gone, and their new life without the presence of the person who died. Yet it takes a long time for this reality to sink in. The person cannot yet believe that this has really happened. Their desire is to 'find' that which is lost, so they engage in the psychological task of 'searching'. Reality will surely come. But how is it actualized? The simple answer is 'one disappointment after another'. We search and do not find; we yearn, but that longing is not fulfilled. Only after that important process can reality be faced.

The Season of Confrontation

In one sense, the seasons of numbness and yearning are a time of *avoidance*, and that is natural. The challenge of this third season is to accept the reality of the loss and experience the pain of that realisation. Thus this is characterised as a time of 'angry sadness'. What is it that people confront? More often than not, the reality of the loss confronts people with their own powerlessness to change the situation, for if we could do anything to change the effect, we would surely do it. Thus, the grieving person confronts their sense of inadequacy to control the situation, and our need to master that becomes an issue of 'What do you do, when there is nothing you can do?' This often becomes the foundation of the responses of anger, guilt and depression, which are usually an attempt to gain some sense of control in a situation that is beyond control.

It is important to validate these emotions, for they are teaching the person about their feelings regarding the old life which has gone, and their new life without the presence of the person who died. Yet it takes a long time for this reality to sink in

The Season of Adjustment

The question each grieving individual must address is 'How is my life different in the light of my loss?' That challenge will be faced in numerous areas of the person's life, including the practical adjustments to new tasks that are having to be assumed, and old tasks that are being relinquished. There are also emotional adjustments, such as coming to terms with loneliness, or social adjustments, where social activities and settings are now being conducted without the deceased. These and other areas may be major adjustments for the grieving individual.

Our task is to help empower people to adjust to this new environment in which their lost relationship is missing.

The Season of Reorganization

The seasons of adjustment and reorganization are precursors to a re-establishment of life, by a social and emotional re-entry to the everyday world. We learn to live with loss as we re-invest ourselves in new persons, ideas and things. Reconciliation of grief means coming to the place where we can accept life as meaningful, even in the light of loss. We do not recover from grief, in the sense that loss changes us forever. But when we learn how to integrate loss into our life, and affirm that life is still meaningful, then we have come full circle in our grief journey. Here is where our Christian faith can add such an important perspective on the situation.

when we learn how to integrate loss into our life, and affirm that life is still meaningful, then we have come full circle in our grief journey

Complicating Factors in Mourning

While grief is a natural human experience, not a sickness or a disease, nonetheless there are several factors which can contribute to mourning being complicated. Complicated mourning is just that, *complicated*. Part of the difficulty here has been the absence of a diagnostic category to allow the mental health profession adequately to define or recognize the phenomenon, or to identify anything but the most basic uncomplicated grief. What is pathological, or abnormal grief? The demarcation between

uncomplicated and complicated mourning is hazy, and constantly being re-evaluated. No determination of 'abnormality' can be made without taking into consideration the various, unique factors that are known to influence any specific response to loss. Reactions always have to be understood in the context of *this* particular loss, for *this* particular person, in *this* particular circumstance.

Dr Therese Rando lists seven high-risk factors that can predispose any individual to complicated mourning.⁸ Note the word 'predispose'. That does not mean that these factors *necessitate* a complicated process. For our purposes here, suffice it to say that when you encounter situations that fit the following criteria, you should at least be aware that mourning *could* be complicated.

1. Sudden and unexpected death, especially where the death has been traumatic, violent, mutilating or random. Situations reflecting this factor might include vehicular accidents, heart attacks, suicide, homicide, and many others. It is worth noting that as people live longer because of medical advancements, the likelihood of dying by accident or something unexpected increases. Thus it is not unrealistic to anticipate a growing number of complicated grief reactions in years to come.

2. Death from an overly long illness. While this factor may surprise some, deaths after a long-term illness can produce a host of stresses, including social alienation, guilt and anger, which can haunt the survivor. Again, as medical advances mean people do not die immediately from their ailments, we can expect a growing number of mourning complications.

3. Loss of a child, whether a stillbirth, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, childhood illness, accidental death, teenage suicide, or the increasing incidence of the loss of adult children. The death of any child always seems unnatural. Again, as people live longer, the chances increase of one's adult child being in an accident or suffering a heart attack. This factor seems to in-

crease the possibility of such complications.

4. The mourner's perception of the loss as being preventable. Perceived carelessness or negligence brings feelings of anger, victimization and unfairness. Grievors often feel the need to assign blame as an attempt to gain some sense of control in a situation that is out of control.

These first four factors are associated with the specific death. The remaining three have to do with prior and subsequent variables:

5. A relationship with the deceased that was markedly angry, ambivalent, or overly dependent.

6. Prior or concurrent liabilities, e.g. unaccommodated or unresolved prior losses; mental health problems; or bereavement overload due to cumulative losses.

7. The mourner's perceived lack of social support. In our death-denying culture, this can happen, but the good news is that support programs can help.

Yet, whether complicated or not, grief is always a difficult struggle. There will be times when the grieving person will wonder if they can make it, but your involvement will help them to find the confidence that they can. And that, after all, is what we are called to do.

Dr Bill Webster grew up in Arbroath, Scotland, underwent theological education at London Bible College, and was a pastor in Canada for many years. After the death of his young wife in 1983 he struggled to come to terms with his loss, as well as with the practical tasks of looking after his two sons, then only 9 and 7. After working through these issues, Bill returned to university and completed a degree in psychology before embarking on his doctoral program. He is now involved in a specialized ministry as a grief counsellor, offering support and encouragement to people after a significant loss. To find out more about Dr Webster and the resources of the Centre for the Grief

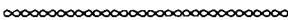
Journey, check his website at <[http:// www.griefjourney.com](http://www.griefjourney.com)> In the next article in this series, Dr Webster will give a rationale for grief support programs, as well as some practical suggestions as to how to establish such a ministry.

Footnotes

1. T A Rando, *Complicated Mourning* (Champaign, Ill., Research Press, 1993), p. 22.
2. Alan J Wolfelt, *Death and Grief: A Guide for Clergy*, (Muncie, Ind., Accelerated Development Inc., 1988), p.1.
3. Ibid, p.1.
4. T A Rando, *Grief, Death and Dying: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers* (Champaign, Ill., Research Press, 1984), p.16.
5. Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care* (Westminster Press, 1983), p. 54.
6. This material is adapted from Dr Bill Webster, *The Guide to Good Grief Groups* (Greenleaf, 2001).
7. Concept of 'Seasons of Mourning' adapted from Dr Bill Webster, *When Someone You Care About Dies* (Greenleaf, 1996).
8. T A Rando, *Complicated Mourning* (Champaign, Ill., Research Press, 1993), pp. 5 - 11. (The seven complicating factors are taken from Rando. Illustrations and explanations of 1 - 4 are by Dr Bill Webster).

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J William Worden, *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. (New York, Springer, 1982).



Humour in the Pulpit?

James Taylor, Alloa

*To court a grin when you would
woo a soul,
'Tis pitiful
To break a jest when pity should
inspire
Pathetic inspiration; and to address
The skittish fancy with facetious
tales
When sent with God's commission
to the heart.*

William Cowper's lines pose the question: When is it legitimate to use humour in the pulpit? What place can humour have when we are dealing with such profound subjects such as sin and salvation, life and death, forgiveness and judgment? How can we be humorous, or even lighthearted, when we are stressing the sinfulness of sin, offering Christ to dying sinners or encouraging a radical holiness of life?

Rikki Fulton

Good reasons can be advanced for firmly rejecting humour. We all know that humour can mock what is serious,

trivialise what is crucial, debase what is pure, ridicule what is sincere and reduce to levity what is sacred. Rikki Fulton, with his portrayal of the Rev IM Jolly, was not just ultimately responsible for the demise of Late Call on Scottish Television, but, in the process, he made fun of something which was fundamentally serious. It was Peter Sellers who said, 'To label any subject unsuitable for comedy is to admit defeat'. A long line of tv comics have set their sights on the subject of Christianity and, far from admitting defeat, have achieved notable victories. They have clearly shown that humour can debase and mar and even come perilously close to blasphemy.

General levity a vice

CH Spurgeon had a strong sense of humour and knew how to use it. Yet he was deeply aware of the dangers. He said to his students, 'We must conquer – some of us especially – our tendency to levity. A great distinction exists between holy cheerfulness, which is a virtue, and that general levity, which is a vice. There is a levity which has not enough heart to laugh, but trifles with everything; it is flippant, hollow, un-

real. A hearty laugh is no more levity than a hearty cry'.

Humour can also blind listeners to the sober truth of the Gospel and the stark realities they ought to be facing. Humour can be a profound distraction. One older colleague in the ministry was noted for his humour. Every sermon – and he was a popular 'guest preacher' – was prefaced by twenty minutes or so of unrelated funny stories. It was obvious, however, that congregations switched off when he ultimately got round to the serious part of his sermon. A sermon I heard as a young man at a well known convention is now remembered, not so much for its presumed call to holiness of living, but for its light hearted humour. It was interesting to note, later, that the humour was omitted from the published version.

It is sad, indeed when, instead of being recognised as a man of God, a preacher's reputation is that of a comic, a teller of tales, a stimulator of laughs, an amusing after dinner speaker. The remark passed to a young preacher, after he had amused his congregation with one humorous anecdote after another, highlights the danger. As one

woman bade him 'Goodnight' she left him with the comment, 'Stick in son, you're a scream!' It was John Henry Jowett who said, 'We never reach the innermost room in any man's soul by the expediences of the showman or the buffoon.'

The offence of bad taste

Humour can become a sharp instrument for unwarranted wounding and hurting. Immense harm can be done when we invite laughter at somebody or something which is held dearly by others. A young minister, born and bred in the central belt of Scotland, found himself ministering in a highland parish. On returning to preach in his home church he said that he was sometimes asked, 'Do they speak Gaelic where you now minister?' 'Of course not. We are civilised!' He raised a laugh. The Session Clerk, however, was not amused. He was from Lewis and was deeply offended, not just by the story, but by the laughter. We have all heard stories which were in utter bad taste, told at the wrong time and in the wrong place and which caused similar hurt.

Humour can be so patronising, revealing disrespect for our listeners. A Professor of Practical Theology in one of our ancient Universities once claimed that 'the mark of a good children's address is how soon you can make the adults laugh'. That statement, in itself, is amusing but what lies behind it certainly isn't. It suggests that the speaker is talking over the heads of the children to the adults and that is disrespectful. Men can be guilty of this when they are talking to a congregation of women. In the writer's denomination, the male President is asked to speak briefly to the Assembly Women's Rally. It is not uncommon for the women to complain that the President treats them as worthy of remarks more inane than serious. After a prominent male figure in charismatic renewal spoke at a large womens' conference in Scotland some time ago, one of the women could scarcely contain herself. 'Who does he think we are – a crowd of giggly schoolgirls?'

Would a little humorous imagination in how we state some great truth draw a smile from our listeners, not just of appreciation, but also of understanding?

Flippant banter out of place

Can we find, therefore, in Scripture any help in our use of humour? At first sight, the Bible seems to discourage it. There is little in the demeanour of Jesus to suggest that gags flowed freely from the lips of 'the man of sorrows' who was 'acquainted with grief'. He even appeared to denounce laughter. 'Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep' (Lk.6:25). When we turn to the Epistles they contain serious warnings about the tone of our speech. 'Nor', writes Paul, 'should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving' (Eph.5:4). A minimum of research will reveal that 'foolish talk' means 'coarse vulgarity' and 'coarse joking' can mean 'flippant banter' or 'polished wit with an element of cheek'. Such a way of speaking is not uncommon on tv and, sadly, can occasionally be heard from those commissioned to preach the Gospel.

The humour of Christ

Yet there is humour in Scripture, particularly in the Gospels. One well known author, Elton Trueblood, has even written a book on 'The Humour of Christ' and it makes compelling reading. Our Lord helps us to see that humour can be used to make a point and reinforce it. He employed humour in this way to show the utter inconsistency of the leaders' behaviour and the emptiness and hypocrisy of their pomposity. Did the crowd remain sober faced when he charged the Pharisees with being afraid of swallowing a flea while happily swallowing a camel (Mt.23:24)? Did his reference to the difficulty of a camel passing through the eye of a needle not raise a laugh

(Mt.19:24)? And what of someone trying to remove a speck from some else's eye while having a plank of wood in his own eye? Our familiarity with the story of the Pharisee and publican at prayer in the temple should not blind us to the humour of the arrogance of the Pharisee. Not for the first time humour was used to show the true size of the mighty.

There is evidence, too, in Scripture that it is legitimate to use humour to apply a light touch to a difficult, even heavy, subject. Behind 1 Corinthians 12 there was probably the problem in the Corinthian church of bitter envy and the disharmony of jealousy. How would Paul deal with it? He chose to do so, not by a theological exposition of the nature of the church, but by a lighthearted description of a conversation between the various members of the human body. The lightness, even the humour, of his touch is exemplary.

A smile of understanding

We often find in the Gospels the use of humorous surprise or incongruity. Our Lord was fond of the humour of paradox. He spoke of losing in order to find, of dying in order to live. Imagine how the truths enshrined in these words could be stated in a straightforward way and then think of how striking is the almost humorous way our Lord actually put it. Would a little humorous imagination in how we state some great truth draw a smile from our listeners, not just of appreciation, but also of understanding?

While there was no outrageous humour in Jesus there was no stodge either. Writes HE Fosdick: 'He never jests as Socrates does, but he often lets the ripple of a happy breeze play over the surface of the mighty deep.' Per-

haps our Lord is reminding preachers that what they need is not outlandish humour but, more often than not, a lighter touch.

Breaking the tension

Humour can also be used to relax and rest our listeners or to ‘break the tension of regularity’. After all, we ask them to sit in one place, often an uncomfortable pew, for a fair period of time and, often, to listen to sustained argument. Such an experience is unique in their week. A rest, a chance to move their bodies, even in polite laughter, will do them no harm and will prepare them for more of what we ask them to receive. The gift of ‘resting’ a congregation is possessed by few preachers but it is a valued gift when exercised well and responsibly.

Surely the chief value of humour lies in making a point and then driving it home. It was JB Phillips who said ‘If... words... are to enter men’s hearts and bear fruit, they must be the right words shaped cunningly to pass men’s defences and explode silently and effectively within their minds.’ Very often this can be done as humour illustrates and drives the point home. Some of the videos from bodies such as Scripture Union employ this method with considerable effect. The viewers may laugh but, at the same time, valuable points are being slipped past defences and resistance to the challenge is being overcome. A recent speaker was trying to stress the difference between the sad reality of our experience and what ought to be in terms of victorious Christian living. He needed an illustration and a humorous one would have helped. He found it. A leader of an army patrol into enemy territory radioed his officer, ‘I’ve taken ten prisoners!’ ‘Bring them in,’ he was told. ‘I can’t,’ the soldier called back, ‘they won’t let me!’

A magnificent tool – never our master

What conclusion can we reach? Certainly we must never confuse gravity, which is commendable, with dullness, which is not. We are called neither to

bore our listeners, nor to entertain them. We must seek to cultivate a lightness of touch which rejects levity but which never undermines the seriousness of our message and its challenge. Humour, however wisely and responsibly employed, can be a magnificent tool yet never our master. The reputation we seek is that of messengers of God, not comics.



“Evangelicalism Divided”

Review Article by David Searle on Iain H Murray's book

Evangelicalism Divided – A record of crucial change in the years 1950–2000

Iain H Murray

Banner of Truth, Edinburgh 2000.

342pp. £13.50

ISBN 0 85151 783 8

This major, carefully documented work is concerned to trace the fundamental shift of doctrinal distinctiveness among evangelicals, primarily in the Church of England, and also in churches in North America. Murray's hypothesis is that this shift has been largely caused by a three-fold influence: liberal theology, ecumenism and the desire among evangelical scholars for intellectual respectability. Prior to the mid 1960s, those evangelicals, who are the subject of the book, courageously stood firm on biblical principles in the tradition of the Reformers. Thereafter they have begun to lose their way as they have succumbed to the subtle temptation of wanting to extend evangelical influence within mainline denominations and be accepted by non-evangelicals as voices to be heard. In this review, after a brief overview of the main arguments of the book, I shall venture to make some tentative comments on the author's hypothesis.

Five main themes are dealt with. First is growth of liberal theology due to Schleiermacher's writings and his separation of objective truth from Christian 'feelings'. His teaching on religious 'experience' opened the way to serious loss of fidelity to the Scriptures, his corrosive influence spreading to theologians on both side of the Atlantic.

Second, two chapters are given to the development of Billy Graham's

thinking which is followed through (in the opinion of this reviewer) with accuracy and compassion. Murray's case is that while the evangelist continued to preach a message which had the Cross of Christ at its heart, he also pursued a deliberate policy of ecumenism, insisting that churchmen of all theological persuasions be invited to take part in his crusades, which inevitably led to serious questions about both the effectiveness and rightness of his ministry. Graham's regrettable naivety over the support American Presidents offered him is given honest yet gracious treatment.

Third, Murray detects 'an unconscious shift in ecclesiology' which he believes evangelical Anglicans adopted as a consequence of their experience of the high profile Graham Crusades of 1954–56. The sharp difference of opinion between John W R Stott and Martyn Lloyd-Jones at the Evangelical Alliance Conference of 1966 is seen as a decisive event in the change in theological stance of evangelicals within mainline denominations, evidenced in the outcome of the Keele (1967) and Nottingham (1977) Anglican Congresses. Stott and Packer are portrayed as opting to work for greater influence of evangelicals within the Anglican Communion and for pragmatic reasons allying with Anglo-Catholics in the attempt to resist liberal influences in the denomination.

Fourth, 'Intellectual Respectability and Scripture' is another theme. The author has an impressive grasp of the issues involved and demonstrates that many who seek to make evangelical theology intellectually respectable invariably compromise the reformed

understanding of verbal inspiration. For interested readers who want to follow up Murray's arguments, he gives a wealth of footnote references to a wide range of literature, mostly written within the past two decades.

A fifth major theme is 'the growing warmth between evangelicals and Roman Catholics' (p.220) which ultimately found expression in 1994 in the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (ECT). There are no prizes for guessing that in discussing the intense debate which followed ECT, Murray comes down firmly on the side of those who strenuously opposed the ecumenical rapprochement with Roman Catholics by leading American evangelicals. The reader is eloquently (again with impressive documentation) warned of the danger of tolerating error in the church for the sake of unity.

A sixth issue, which has not been far from the surface throughout the entire book, is the vexed question of ecclesiology and the 'one church' vision. While he maintains that his ecclesiology is that of the reformers, some readers will quickly realise his is in fact very much an 'exclusive' view of church membership, not the 'inclusive' view of the mainstream reformers.¹ Having already dealt with the importance of the question, 'What is a Christian?', he develops his view of the church visible and invisible and the implications for the preservation of a faithful church.

The final chapter gives a helpful summary under six headings of the main conclusions the author has reached.

By any standards, this is an extremely impressive work and reformed Christians will be deeply indebted to Iain Murray for his immense scholarship, in-

exorable logic and clear passion for the purity of the church and the glory of God. However, I would respectfully suggest there are several areas in which many reformed evangelicals will beg to differ with him.

First must be the interpretation he gives to the Martyn Lloyd-Jones' address in 1966. Murray cites the reporting of only two Christian magazines, both of which were controlled by the Billy Graham organisation. He thus clearly implies that the Graham ecumenicity engaged in biased, unfair assessment of the Doctor, portraying him as saying something he never said. However, the careful reader who takes time to go back to the Doctor's original address, as well as to the Christian media's many other reports, will find it impossible to accept Iain Murray's interpretation of the Lloyd-Jones' meaning. Such a basic apparent inaccuracy does raise serious questions about the objectivity of the author's judgements elsewhere in the book.

Those evangelicals who have served a lifetime in mainline denominations without let or hindrance by liberal colleagues will be disappointed that Murray seems unable to understand or empathise with their position. Some of the 'mainline' giants of the past held views which certainly would not be acceptable to the author. Within the limits of this review, I have space only to cite two. Samuel Rutherford held a highly pragmatic and, dare I say, an unbiblical view that the divine Christ was the true King of all Scotland, whereas the Incarnate Christ was King of the Church. So Rutherford could refer to the entire population of Scotland as 'Christ's flock'.² I cite this to illustrate the realism necessarily employed by evangelicals in mainline denominations.

In my long experience in a denomination with many 'liberal' ministers, I have to say that personally I have known few who would actually deny Paul's Gospel; it is not just that they sincerely believe their own 'spin' on Paul, but also that they regard us evangelicals as putting our own 'spin' on him too. And it must be admitted

that there are as many 'orthodox' who seem as slow to reach out to the lost with Paul's gospel as those liberals.

The second example of a 'mainline' giant is that of JC Ryle who is alluded to and quoted with approval several times in the book. But what is not mentioned is the fact that, in the interests of fairness, Ryle followed the practice of appointing not only evangelical canons in his diocese but more than a balancing number of canons of very different theological views.³ Murray unfortunately does not understand this kind of co-operation which freed Ryle to declare the truth faithfully and fearlessly, his integrity as a bishop widely respected within his denomination. In his day, no less than today, there were many clergy who hardly even paid lip service to their church's doctrinal standards. Not a few of Murray's statements in the book would come very near to condemning Ryle's position, despite the fact he is held up by him as a paradigm that modern Anglicans should emulate.

The book is implicitly critical of leading Anglican evangelicals who not only have never compromised the truth of God in their published works but indeed have stood firm as champions of sound biblical orthodoxy. One thinks, for example, of Stott's most excellent book, *The Cross of Christ*, perhaps the only orthodox work of note on the Atonement for at least a generation, yet the reader will search in vain for a word of appreciation of John Stott's outstanding contribution to the cause of the Gospel, not least in his masterly strategy to support and develop theological education in Third World countries.

A further disappointment for some readers will be the astonishing selectivity the author chooses to exercise. The remarkable work of the Proclamation Trust over some twenty years, emanating from the ministry of Dick Lucas in St Helen's Bishopsgate, is surely a case in point. Apart from a note in the fly-leaf, there is no mention of it in the book, and not a word about Dick Lucas, whose 37-year ministry in St Helen's Bishopsgate has helped nurture

hundreds of Anglican clergy who have not yielded one iota to the current ecumenical pressures and who continue to exercise faithful expository ministries building up the *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. (Cf. also in the Anglican Church the movements, 'Reform' and 'Fellowship of Word and Spirit', which represent well over 1500 clergy committed to the reformed evangelical position; there is no mention of these.) Nor is there more than a passing reference to Scotland and to movements within a mainline denomination such as the Crieff Fellowship has fostered. In the period covered by the book, the number of reformed evangelical ministers within the Church of Scotland has risen from literally less than a handful to many hundreds who now bear witness to the evangel in virtually every part of the nation.

A final comment on the book must be the total absence in its pages of any mention of evangelism. We all know of churches and groups of churches which have been preoccupied with purity of doctrine and disciplinary procedures; this Iain Murray would applaud. But we have not noticed that they have been particularly concerned (far less fruitful) in searching out the lost and gathering in men and women to the fold of God. After forty years of ministry, I have observed that churches with an 'exclusive' view of membership can be almost entirely barren in evangelism. A far stronger biblical case can be made for an 'inclusive' view of church membership than Murray is prepared to allow, and it has been those holding this latter view who seem to me to have been singularly fruitful in reaching the unsaved for Christ.

Nevertheless, this important work carries solemn warnings for evangelical Christians at the start of a new century. May it revive our love for the Church of Christ and lay a burden on all our hearts to take heed how and with what materials we build on the foundation and corner stone, Christ Jesus, the King and Head of his Church.

David C Searle, Rutherford House,
Edinburgh

(Footnotes on page 35)

Footnotes

- 1 Murray, according to James Bannerman's understanding of church membership, would seem to have adopted an Independent's stance on membership of the church, rather than the reformed (mainline) Presbyterian stance. See James Bannerman, *Church of Christ* (1869, reprint Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1960) pp.73ff.
- 2 Readers interested to follow up this Christology which has been criticised as being Nestorian should read Gillespie's work, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, 1644, and the critique by W D J McKay, *An Ecclesiastical Republic*, Church Government in the Writings of George Gillespie (Rutherford House, Edinburgh, 1997), pp.61ff.
- 3 See Eric Russell, *That Man of Granite with the Heart of a Child* (Christian Focus Publications, Fearn, 2001) p.145.



“Praise!”

Review Article by Andrew Dick

Praise!

Publ. Praise Trust, Darlington, 2000.
ISBN 0-953280 9-2-6

[Having read with interest the three review articles of the new 'Praise!' hymnbook in the 'Banner of Truth' magazine, we thought the Rutherford Journal might complement Messrs Palmers's, Hulse's and Murray's evaluation of the book by offering a review by one of the younger, more avant-garde Scottish minister. Readers will quickly see that Andrew Dick approaches 'Praise!' from quite a different angle to that of most reviews which have appeared so far. Ed.]

As I am sure many other ministers do, whenever I see a new hymn book on the shelves of my local Christian book shop I have a quick flick through and make rather a snap judgement as to whether it is really worth buying. When I did that with the new hymn book entitled simply *Praise!* produced by the Praise Trust, my first impression was not very favourable. On almost every page I turned to was an old fashioned hymn that I had never heard sung, by writers I had never heard of, or else some rather predictable, slightly updated 'golden oldie,' or an almost equally obvious overworked Graham Kendrick song. I replaced it on the bookshop shelf, having dismissed it as having little relevance for a new century. And then, to my surprise, the Rutherford Journal asked me to review it.

Heavily Theological

For someone of my generation, even on closer inspection *Praise!* does not look promising. Though well laid out, attractively produced, with good indices and helpfully arranged according to theme rather than alphabetically (unlike most modern hymn books), many of the hymns, psalms and spiritual

songs the editors have selected are either unfamiliar or predictable – in equal proportions in those categories. Given that this hymn book has been developed by a group associated with the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches attempting to revise some of the traditional hymns, it is probably not surprising that it has a very conservative look to it. I had two immediate impressions on a close examination of the book: first, there are few of the intimate choruses so popular in most other contemporary hymn books; second, *Praise!* was perhaps heavily theological – which cannot be a bad thing given the light weight quality of so many modern hymns.

Various Strengths

There are some strengths that emerge as one looks more closely at the *Praise!* hymn book. Unlike most recent hymn books, all one hundred and fifty Psalms are represented and some of these adaptations of the Psalms (culled from a variety of sources) appeared to me to be very usable. Further, the music for each item in the book includes guitar chords which also seem to be playable with a keyboard (so widely used in churches today); though by no means always easy chords, they would not be beyond the abilities of a moderately accomplished guitarist. Another strength of the book is that the revision of the words of traditional hymns in the main has been done sensitively. As far as I can ascertain, though 'thee' and 'thou' have been replaced, the language is still suitably dignified and is without too many archaisms.

I am also delighted that the hymns of writers such as Christopher Idle (one of the compilers) and Timothy Dudley-Smith are well represented since they have been producing more material far more theologically satisfy-

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Church on Fire: The Story of Anglican Evangelism

Roger Steer

Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1998. 484pp. £8 99

ISBN 0 340 64 1933 2

This is a most fascinating book for all interested in the development of evangelicalism in the Church of England and in its offspring, the Episcopal Church of the United States. It could well turn out to be the textbook to update or even replace GR Ballein's classic *History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*. Steer retraces the ground already covered by Ballein but continues the story until almost the present day, the Lambeth Conference of 1998.

Steer begins with the part played by the Church of England in the Reformation, highlighting the most significant characters from Wycliffe to William and Mary, in the first of his eight sections, headed 'The Church on Fire with Reforming Zeal, England 1330-1700'. In subsequent sections, he moves on to look at the period of the evangelical revival (1700-1800) and, after a study of the contributions made by Wesley and other well known people, including Grimshaw, Newton and Simeon, he takes the reader, with Whitefield, across the Atlantic. There the reader is brought to review the intriguing development of Anglicanism from the era of the North American colonies through the War of Independence into the USA and then onwards until 1900. Before continuing into the 20th century, Steer comes back to England, where he describes what has happened from the evangelical revival until the death of Bishop JC Ryle in 1900.

The weight of the consideration of the 20th century, which becomes of immense interest to contemporary evangelicals, is given to the postwar period, including events surrounding the ministry of Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones,

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John Stott, Jim Packer, David Watson and the charismatic movement. Stott rebuffed the call of Dr Lloyd-Jones for all evangelicals to leave their denominations and re-muster, and paved the way for the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele, Nottingham and Caister. NEAC completely reshaped Anglican evangelicalism, bringing it in more recent years to the very heart of the Church of England.

In Part 6, Steer returns to North America to consider evangelicalism engaged in the battle with theological liberalism and the divisions of American Episcopalianism. This is continued in Part 7, dealing with the encounter of evangelicalism with post-modern (permissive) sexuality and the Lambeth Conference confrontation with New Jersey's Bishop John Spong and his vigorous defence of homosexuality. Section 8, the closing section, contains a plea for holiness to be developed alongside evangelism.

Roger Steer has thoroughly researched his work, after interviewing contemporary evangelical leaders. The book is clearly and graphically written and consists chiefly of thumbnail sketches of the leaders of the evangelical movement over six-and-a-half centuries. A good read.

Peter Cook, Alston

Big Bang, Small Voice: Reconciling Genesis and Modern Science

P.G. Nelson

Latheronwheel, Whittles Publishing, 1999. 157pp. £4.50
ISBN 1 870325 13 3

This book attempts to take both Genesis and modern science seriously. An introductory section sketches the principal conclusions of mainstream science about the origins of the universe, the earth and its geology, life and man; (the waters are muddled a little here by including in this section a brief sketch of "creation science"); set alongside is an analysis of the Biblical

account, interpreted literally, including a careful account of the flood.

Nelson's strategy is then first to assume the correctness of the scientific account, and to enquire whether the Biblical view can be reconciled with it; he concludes that it can, considering such ideas as the ways in which God can be responsible for the origin of physical laws and the guiding of "random" processes, and the different uses of language.

Secondly he starts from the assumption of the correctness of the Biblical view, to see whether scientific views can be accommodated. His basic idea here is that God could have made the universe recently and suddenly, but made it to appear old and naturally evolved.

The strengths of this book are its careful, humble approach to the problems, from a committed Biblical stance, and its consideration of as many views as possible; the bibliography is exceptionally full and valuable. Its weaknesses in my judgment are that it tries to cover too many topics in the space available; that at several key points there is a lack of maturity in his own conclusions; and that the style in general is rather wooden, and the structure confusing. I do not think this book should be recommended as a source of final answers to the thorny problems discussed in it (and the author's own refreshingly honest and humble conclusions would support this); but it does raise many of the questions, and with the aid of its references could be used as a way into the detailed study of these issues.

Paul Wraight, Aberdeen

Struggling to Belong: What is the Church for anyway?

Simon Jones

IVP, Leicester, 1998. 144 pp. £4.99
ISBN 0 85111 576 4

Why are church attendances declining? Why, for many Christians, is experience of church negative rather than positive? Does a Christian really have to belong to a church? What is church for anyway?

In this short book, Simon Jones attempts to answer these and many other questions which are important and relevant to church-going Christians today. Using his experience gained as a Baptist Pastor, the author deals with many of the complaints and difficulties he has come across in his ministry. In attempting to give answers, he touches on many of the issues which cause division and controversy in today's church eg. the role and type of worship; hymn singing – traditional v. modern; leadership; women in the church; work amongst children and keeping the balance between the different age groups.

Although Jones acknowledges that there is much wrong in the church, this is not a book filled with despair and endless criticism. His approach is always positive and he does attempt to give real solutions and straight answers. He tries to examine the success of the New Testament church and Paul's language describing that church as a family and a household, linking both to modern applications.

This book is not, by any means, a complete analysis of where the church is going (far too short for that). Rather it is the personal viewpoint of its author – it does not give authoritative answers but is an excellent starting point for serious discussion of a serious topic.

The book's appeal to a wide readership lies in the use of plain language, honesty and humour and its lively, yet sensitive, approach, based on real situations and examples. The result – a real gem of a book – easy to read and practical, yet thought-provoking and challenging to leaders and lay people alike.

Oliver Ferguson, Bangor, Co Down

More Precious Than Silver: 366 Daily Devotional Readings

Joni Eareckson Tada

Zondervan Publishing House, Michigan, 1998.

ISBN 0 310 21627 3

Out of human tragedy God can bring precious stones.

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It was just so with Joni Eareckson Tada, who following a diving accident in 1967 was left in a wheel chair paralysed from the shoulders down. Joni has invested much of her time in a quest to understand better the goodness of an all sufficient, loving God in the midst of human suffering.

In her first 2 books *Joni* and *A Step Further* she does not hide away from the difficult questions she faced about suffering worked through her broken life revealing greater things in his perfect plan.

More Precious Than Silver is Joni's latest devotional book, it is beautifully presented being illustrated with a number of her line drawings. The title is taken from Psalm 12.6 'The words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in furnace... purified seven times.' (Unlike gold which requires impurities to bond silver is pure!)

Each day begins with a short reading from the bible; this is commented on and ends with a brief thought or question and a prayer. The book would be a very appropriate present for a friend as an introduction to the Christian life and as a book for your bedside whether you are a lark or an owl!

Liz Frost, Bangor, Co Down

Pastoral Care and Counselling

William K Kay & Paul C Weaver
Paternoster Press, Cumbria, 1997.
200pp.

ISBN 0 85564 784 4

This Manual of *Pastoral Care and Counselling* will be an invaluable tool for equipping the Church. All leaders, ordained and lay, seeking to live out their calling in congregation, into the community and out into the wider world will profit. Each chapter of the book is anchored in Biblical truth. It contains a wealth of practical material which the reader will want to refer to again and again. In Part I the authors tackle the subject of 'Ministry' within the context of a rapidly changing world.

They focus in on the challenge which faces the church and discuss how she should adapt and act as 'Salt and Light' in secular society.

The main themes include Cost of Ministry, Gifting for Ministry and the responsibilities that come with it: within the local setting and outwith it. Consideration is given to the pastoral task of shepherding the flock in teaching and management. Youth work is targeted and well researched. In these days of drift from the church this chapter has particular relevance.

How effective is your congregation's youth work at impacting upon the lives of this generation?

Part 2 gives an overview of counselling which every 'People Helper' will find useful. Christian counselling is differentiated from humanistic approaches with the emphasis that biblical authority ought not to be compromised. This section underlines too the importance of confidentiality and necessary boundaries within which the counselling takes place. The text is most readable giving one a good working knowledge and whetting the appetite for further study.

I liked the book. It reflects hard work on the part of the writers. The graphics and Bible basis which precede each chapter make for easier reading and understanding. Questions at the end focus the thinking and are suitable for group study.

Pat Shirley, Antrim.

Truth Seeker: A new age journey to God

Mark Phillips

IVP, Leicester, 1998. 176pp. £4.99

ISBN 0 85110 894 6

This book is a personal testimony of a teenager who begins to take part in "harmless" seances and mind altering experiences. This teenager becomes a university student whose intellectual and spiritual quest is continually ignited in New Age teachings and experiences. This student becomes the man who is obsessed in his pursuit of truth and distressed at his lack of fulfilment. Through much turmoil,

fulfilment is eventually found in the truth of Christ, yet tested as he endures heartache and pain through the death of his wife.

One of the main strengths of this book is its appeal to a wide audience, both Christian and non-Christian. For the Christian it is exciting to see the power of God at work in changing a life that is in search of truth. This book can also serve as a reminder that meeting a person where he/she is at is vitally important as we see this displayed in the people who play an important role in Mark's conversion experience. It can also serve as a reminder to the believer of Satan's deceptiveness and craftiness. For the non-Christian, this book can provide a starting point in the pursuit of a relationship with God. In today's society where almost anything equates with truth, this book provides a path with an ending in the ultimate truth.

This book held my interest as the spiritual journey of Mark Phillips was unveiled. I was surprised to what levels he went to in his seeking of truth. It reminds me that we are all unique and God works differently in bringing people to Him.

Jennifer Armstrong, Southampton

Ministering to Today's Adults

Kenn Gangel

Word Publishing, Nashville, 1999.

283pp, \$24.99US

ISBN 0 8499 1361 6

The words of the Bob Dylan song "The Times They Are A-Changin'" is as true today as it was in the tumultuous 1960's. All around us we are in constant contact with a changing world. We now hear people speak of the earth as a global village, thanks in part to the Internet revolution. With the increase of change in our society, old methods of communication and understanding are not as effective as they once were. This is especially true of the church. Declining numbers in church attendance, especially in the decade of evangelism has shown that society does not view the church as relevant to their lives.

This well-written book seeks to

provide some thought provoking ideas on how to minister to 21st century adults who are dissatisfied with outdated methods of learning. Gangel presents his material in four parts. Part one focuses on foundations for adult ministries and consists of seven chapters that examine how adults learn and how to communicate to adults more effectively. I personally found this section to be the most helpful of the book. Parts two and three focus on age-groups for adult ministries and the family, along with how to minister to different groupings in your church. This material is helpful; however, much of the material in these two sections takes place in an American context that will not apply to many readers in the UK. Part four focuses on programming for adult ministries. This section provides some valuable ideas for developing curriculum material in which to communicate with today's adults.

This book is a very helpful book for both pastors and those involved in leading any type of adult group. At its core it seeks to help those who communicate God's word in a relevant and thought provoking manner. This book can serve as a very useful tool.

Zacharias Armstrong, Southampton

The Authority of the Bible

Colin N Peckham

Christian Focus, Fearn, 1999. 157pp.
ISBN 185792 463 3

This is a short book containing a great deal of information. The author, who is Principal of the Faith Mission Bible College, defends the uniqueness and superiority of the Bible in a brief but easily readable way which will make it accessible to those who find more academic studies of the subject too formidable.

Interestingly the book starts not with the classical texts showing the Divine origin and trustworthiness of Scripture, but with a study of the unity of the Scriptures – showing how a work containing material from such a variety of historical periods and writers and literary genres blend together

to provide a coherent and self-consistent revelation of Divine truth. Strangely although some of the key Biblical ideas common to the whole Scripture are discussed, the concept of covenant which provides the key to understanding the whole unity of God's word and revelation and binds together both Old and Testament and New while mentioned is not fully developed.

This book is what a previous generation might have described as a 'handbook' – in addition to the traditional arguments for the truth of Scripture, there is a list of 92 Old Testament texts (quoted from another work) predicting the Messiah with corresponding texts showing their fulfilment, and a study of the Levitical feasts and sacrifices showing how they point forward to the work of Christ. There is also a chapter on Biblical archaeology.

One feature which the reviewer found of special interest is a comparative study of the Bible with the holy books of other world religions.

There is a great deal of useful and helpful argument and information to be found here in small compass and the general reader will find it both easy to understand and stimulating to faith.

Angus Howat, Tarbert

For the Love of God

D.A. Carson

IVP, Leicester, 1998. 365pp. £12.99
ISBN 0 85111 589 6

This book is a systematic 365-day Bible reading plan based on a modified version of one constructed nineteenth century by Robert Murray McChesney. It is designed to lead the reader through the New Testament and the Psalms twice and the rest of the Old Testament once in the course of one calendar year. Each day, together with the passages to be read that day, Prof. Carson seeks "to provide edifying comments and reflections on some part of the designated texts, and thus to encourage readers to reflect further on the biblical passages they are reading." (p.13)

Many of us in the ministry will have

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sought to encourage our people to develop regular habits of Bible reading. To this end we will have made available some of the various Bible reading notes now published in huge numbers. Many of us subsequently find ourselves disappointed at the unbalanced way many Bible passages are treated. We will echo Prof Carson's observation that often such devotional guides tend to be problem-centred which, at worst, "may ultimately engender the profoundly wrong-headed view that God exists to sort out my problems; they may foster profoundly mistaken interpretations of some scriptures, simply because the handful of passages they treat are no longer placed within the framework of the big picture, which is gradually fading from view."

Over against this Prof Carson seeks to communicate something of the Biblical worldview, the big picture. He places the Biblical passages, and the truth they communicate, into the 'larger framework of God's eternal plan'. In a post-modern world where such 'big-pictures' are increasingly foreign and misunderstood, his attempt is all the more welcome.

Those who are familiar with Prof Carson's writing style will know that his use of vocabulary is rich and varied. I believe this is one of the great strengths of this book. The motivated within our congregations are usually adept in the deployment of a dictionary and will benefit greatly from a year of personal Bible Study with this excellent volume to hand.

Martin Thomson, Wigtown

Introducing Christianity

Michael Keene

Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
144pp. £12.99
ISBN 0 664 25790 9

This book contains eight sub-divided chapters, ranging from Jesus and the Early Church to Church Divisions. The Scriptures, Ceremonies, Celebrations, Worship and Christian Beliefs.

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Each chapter is visually supported with a variety of photographs eg. Life in Bible times, The Bible being copied and illustrated by monks. These would be of value to an adult reader with an informed background on Christianity. I could envisage an RE teacher selecting some of the visual material as a basis for group discussion on eg. Cultural architecture.

The presentation of information on each page is good, if intended for adults. Secondary school students would require much guidance if any part of this book were to be used. The 'In The Glossary' reference located on most pages is helpful. Chapter Eight, 'Christian Beliefs' has a sub-section on suffering which would provide interesting material for a Bible class or Youth Fellowship.

The book is disappointing because the expectations raised by the title are not fulfilled. The author strays from his topic to include secondary issues eg. Churches, Divisions and Conflicts. In this section on Church History, the Scottish Church is given scant reference. Chapter Three does not promote the uniqueness of the Word of God.

The user of this book would need to be an experienced Christian leader who can evaluate its contents.

Kirsti Paterson, Inverness

Urban Theology: A Reader

Michael Northcott (ed)
Cassell, London, 1998. 347pp.
ISBN 0 304 70265 X

This is one of the many things with its roots in the "Faith In the City" report on urban mission. The call issued there to "identify, understand and represent to the wider church the diversity of local theologies" which the Archbishop's Commission discovered resulted in a five year collaboration between academic theologians and urban mission practitioners. This reader is intended for a) workers in Urban Priority Areas (UPAs) b) those living in 'comfortable Britain' who want better to understand

and respond to social deprivation and c) trainers and those preparing for ministry in UPAs. Almost all the contributions are previously published and the vast majority have been written since the "Faith In The City" report was published in the mid 1980s.

There are 12 sections each beginning with a Biblical passage, extracts from "Faith in The City" and an introduction by Michael Northcott, and each followed by a "Further Reading" section which provides brief information on each piece mentioned. The 12 sections are on theology, creativity, the shape of the city, sin, poverty, power, generations and gender, work, worship, ministry, mission, faiths. Overall a broad range of contributors are included though sometimes not so much evenly spread throughout the book as in clusters: for instance while a number of evangelicals are included throughout the book, the section on mission is one where they are especially present and the opposite applies in the section on faiths. This, though, reflects not so much an editorial bias but where different people place their respective emphases. Given that that is what the Urban Theology Group have to start with, they are to be congratulated in providing such a useful and representative mosaic of contemporary writing on urban theology. Despite some smaller errors I noticed (e.g. in getting some names slightly wrong) the book is also well presented and while there are a few overseas contributors the bulk of the work is British. This is a very good place to start for anyone wishing to get acquainted with the best and relatively latest works on urban mission.

Gordon R. Palmer, Edinburgh.

Who is Jesus?

John Dominic Crossan & Richard G. Watts

Westminster John Knox Press,
Louisville, 1996. 144pp.
ISBN 0 664 25842 5

The cover commendation of this book describes it as a "readable introduction to his (Crossan's) understanding of Jesus". This is accurate: the book is

readable (with its question-and-answer format), and it does introduce a particular view of Jesus. This view, however, is a radical and sceptical one, and the book's only interest for readers of this Journal is likely to be as a challenge to us to think out our conservative view of Scripture.

The authors liken themselves to an art museum curator working on an old master painting which has been covered by later paintings; they want to "get down through the layers of interpretation to the original picture of Jesus" (p.6).

They see the story of Jesus' virginal conception as a confession of faith about his significance rather than a biological statement; they see miracles as metaphors (it is we moderns who are dumb enough to read them literally), and, with monotonous regularity, we learn as the book progresses that there was no Last Supper, triumphal entry, 'offer' of Barabbas, denial by Peter, burial by Joseph, empty tomb, Emmaus Road – and there is no after-life! (One of the few things we know about Jesus is that he was baptised by John – we know this because the church was apparently embarrassed by it!)

Crossan maintains that, whereas Christians have traditionally claimed that Christ's passion was foretold by the prophets, it was really the other way round – the New Testament accounts were created to 'fit' the ancient prophecies. This was a poetic way of expressing some deep truths about something or other.

One of the book's challenges for us concerns the way in which we sometimes spiritualise gospel stories (eg blind – spiritually blind); we are reminded that we need to make the point that it's the miracle first, and, only then, the parable in the miracle.

Who is Jesus? is an interesting book for conservatives to read – as a reminder of what we have been delivered from! But, as someone said to the fishing skipper who was considering taking on a poor worker, "If you give him a berth, make it a wide one".

David J Randall, Macduff